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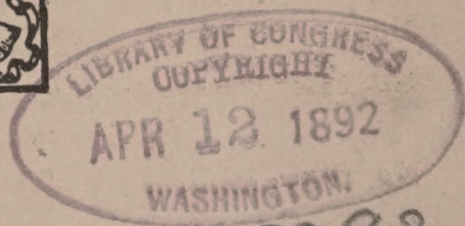
A COVENANT WITH THE DEAD.

A NOVEL.

BY

CLARA LEMORE, *Roberts*

AUTHOR OF "A HARVEST OF WEEDS," "PUT ASUNDER," ETC.



PHILADELPHIA :

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY.

1892.

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A COVENANT WITH THE DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT IN THE OPEN.

IT was a memorable run in more ways than one.

The field was unusually large, and the fox unusually strong in the wind. As a rule, when the Llanrwst pack started their fox from the cover at the top end of Bryntirion, and the wind was from the nor'-west, those who were in the know were able to form their own conclusions as to the route to be taken, and to make their own plans for reaching the scene of the finish by the easiest and best road, irrespective of the fox's whims on the subject of direct locomotion. But on this especial occasion the wiseacres were for once at a disadvantage, and those who stuck as near as might be to the dogs were those who were nearest home at the finish.

And the wiseacres grumbled prodigiously.

Who, they wanted to know, ever heard of a fox trying to climb a mountain after he had had the dogs at his tail for close on thirty minutes?

There were more accidents that day than in the whole season besides. Men and horses who had the most unlimited confidence in each other, and good cause for the same, came to grief among the broken ground at the foot of the hill, which was a *terra incognita* alike to master and beast.

It had been rather a slow day at the start. The first fox did not break away until close on one o'clock, and being a

cunning old strategist, who knew his business thoroughly, he had kept the hunt on the jog from pillar to post for an hour and a half, and managed to give them the slip after all.

After this a move was made for the Bryntirion covers, and at ten minutes past three they started a rouser. Everybody knew at once, by his style of breaking away, that they had got a teaser this time; it had been a beastly day so far, but they were to have a good finish.

Men, horses, and hounds alike shook themselves together and prepared for a bit of smart work. By the time they reached the foot of Bryn-mawr everybody's blood was fairly up, and then, when those in the first flight were past thinking reasonably on any subject whatever, the fox, instead of keeping straight on down wind, as a fox might be expected to do, turned at right angles, and skirting round the east side of the hill, took a short, sharp run up wind, turned again, and dashed in among the boulders and gullies at the foot of the range.

In after years that run became legendary in the annals of the Llanrwst hunt. When a member once got on to the account of that day's casualties strangers were apt to shake their heads in good-natured doubt. And yet, as a matter of fact, it was almost impossible to exaggerate the list of the day's disasters.

Charlotte Kennett, eldest daughter of Hildebert Kennett, Esquire, of Kennett's Wold, Yorkshire, at present on a visit to her sister, Mrs. Prys-Rees of Coed-y-Bychwn, was just at the tail of the first lot when the fox took that extraordinary turn up wind, and in among the broken ground, which so disconcerted his pursuers.

As a rule, Rees brought his sister-in-law out himself, but to-day other duties claimed his time, and he had begged the good services of one of his tenants, a Mr. Evans, on her behalf. And Evans, having grown-up daughters of his own, was duly impressed by the responsibilities of his position; but for this all might have gone well with him. He might have reached his home and family that evening none the worse for the day's doings, and all that follows must have inevitably been ordered differently.

As it was, his first thought, when he found himself

among the shifting shingle and broken ground of the hill-side—ground almost impracticable for anything less sure-footed than a mountain pony—was for the intrepid young woman behind him. He had seen her and her horse Rhino do one or two things already before to-day, and he knew that wherever he led there she would follow. So, with a touch of regret on his own account, he turned his mare's head resolutely aside at the first really nasty jump they came to, and signing to Miss Kennett to wait, he rode a bit more up the hill to see if the ravine narrowed higher up.

Miss Kennett, inwardly rebelling, checked Rhino too, and waited a few seconds listening for her pioneer's signal to come on. As she faced her horse round to the wind she saw the western horizon piled high with solid, lumpy gray clouds, which looked as if they meant mischief; and even as she stood two or three large snowflakes fluttered down irresolutely, as if they had been cast forth against their will, and settled on Rhino's mane and the bosom of her habit. The wind was changing every instant, colder and colder. She shivered at its icy touch, and walked Rhino gently up the hill. It was already too cold to stand with safety.

When she had gone some little distance she began to wonder why she did not meet, or at least see something of, Mr. Evans.

It was now that the deathlike loneliness of the scene struck her for the first time. She found herself on the upward slope of a triangular valley, shut in on two sides by the rugged hills, open on the other to the softer level country below. There was not a living creature bar her horse and herself in sight. The hunt, as many of them as had got so far, had disappeared over a low ridge on her left, and as she waited again she fancied she heard a faint view-halloo in the distance.

Feeling mad to have lost the finish by such a little bit, and rather indignant with Mr. Evans for being the cause of her disappointment, she determined to take matters into her own hands and jump the gully neck or nothing. But it was too dusk to do things rashly. She took the horse up to the ravine to have a look at the jump before putting him at it. To her astonishment, as they came up to the

edge, the creature shied slightly, a vice hitherto unknown in him, and took his next step or two forward with pricked ears and lowered neck.

The next instant Miss Kennett knew everything.

In the shadow at the bottom of the gully, scarcely deeper here than a roadside ditch, lay the motionless figure of a man.

With a startled cry she slid down from her saddle and scrambled down into the little hollow. Yes—it was Mr. Evans—Mr. Evans, with his face of a dull leaden color, all but one spot over his right eyebrow, where there was a patch of red of so vivid a color that it seemed as if all the usual healthy ruddiness of his cheeks had concentrated itself in that smaller space.

Miss Kennett's heart tightened with a sudden awful fear as she knelt down and slid her hand inside the senseless man's vest. No! Thank God, he was not dead. His heart was still beating—faintly, it is true.

After that first sickening flash of terror this discovery was relief enough for the moment, and she busied herself with loosening his throat-gear and getting his head into a less cramped position, and doing one or two little things for his comfort. Then she found his flask—filled, thank Heaven, with brandy, and of goodly proportions to boot—and opening his teeth with the horn handle of her crop, she poured a few drops down his throat. After this his heart-beats strengthened slightly, and she got up out of the ditch and took a good look round.

The snow-clouds from the west had by this time spread themselves out in a smooth, unbroken gray canopy over the whole extent of the sky, and the snow was falling quickly. Away in the valley below her faint lines of white were forming wherever a hedge afforded the snowflakes a few feet of shelter from the wind, which was rapidly increasing to a hurricane. Charlotte Kennett looked round at the helpless man in the hollow behind her, and then again at the dreary prospect in front, and a quick, overwhelming sensation of helplessness smote upon her.

What should she do? Should she ride away at once for help?

And leave the senseless man to be buried under the ap-

proaching snowstorm, and to be in all probability frozen to death before he was discovered again?

The idea was not to be entertained for a moment; let it be for life or for death, she must stay there and do her best for the fellow-creature so curiously thrown upon her mercy. At the thought of passing the night upon the mountain-side with him her heart grew such a craven within her that she put the idea from her with resolute determination, and refused to contemplate the possibility of the thing. Search parties would, of course, be sent out as soon as it was discovered that they were missing. His riderless horse would certainly be seen by somebody, who would at once give the alarm. At the worst it would only be a temporary inconvenience that she would have to put up with.

But, meantime, it was dreadful that her charge should lie out there in the open, with the snowflakes drifting down on his unconscious gray face. And yet, what could she do with him?

About a dozen yards higher up the gully appeared to end abruptly, blocked up by a huge slab of rock which projected five or six feet forward over the hollow. If she could get him in there he would at least be out of the wind and beyond the reach of the snow. She went a little nearer to examine the cranny, Rhino following her like a dog, evidently a little exercised in his mind as to the meaning of this unprecedented finish to the day's run.

The darkness was falling with astonishing rapidity. When she got back to her helpless charge again she had to lean over him to see his face at all, and, doing so, met the unperceptive gaze of his wide-open eyes.

"Thank God!" she cried fervently. "Oh, thank God you are coming round! Now, perhaps, I shall be able to get you under shelter before the fury of the storm reaches us. Do you think you could get on your feet?"

The eyes grew less untroubled, and the brow took a look of perplexity. She saw the effort at thought and encouraged it.

"Try to understand what I am saying to you," she went on, speaking with slow distinctness; "try with all your might to understand. You have been badly thrown, and

you and I are alone on the mountain-side, and there is a heavy snowstorm coming on. I want you to try to move a few steps to a place of shelter I have found—will you? We shall both be frozen here.”

Through the dusk she saw his lips moving, but no sound came. Kneeling by his side, she gave him a few drops from the flask, and waited a little before she said again:

“Will you try to move a few steps—only a very few?”

This time the words came—faint, husky, and uncertain, but reasonable.

“The stirrup,” he said; “put the stirrup within reach.”

Wondering, she did as he bid her, leading Rhino down into the ditch a little way lower down, and bringing the docile beast up to his side. Then she saw what he meant. When he had got the stirrup in his hand he tried to raise himself by its help.

Seeing this, she got behind him and used all her vigorous young strength to second his endeavors, steadying the horse meantime with such expressive words and sounds as might be expected to reach his understanding. But in honest truth the brute did not need these verbal encouragements to do his duty; by this time he knew pretty well all there was to know, and was only too glad to be of help in the crisis.

And at last Evans was on his feet and moving, with one arm round the pommel of the saddle and the other round Miss Kennett’s shoulders. But it was only a very few steps he travelled before he began to sway heavily. She felt him coming, and managed to break the shock of his fall. He had swooned again.

How many times this happened—before she at last had him safe under the shelter of the overhanging rock—she did not know. Sometimes she lost heart for a breathless second or two, and almost resigned herself to sitting quietly down by his side and giving up the struggle. But at these times the memory of his women-folk at home always came to her as a reproach. Were they to be rendered widowed and fatherless because she had not the strength and courage to persevere? And so these momentary little surrenders always ended in another effort, another minute of violent muscular exertion, of eager encouragement to her

helpless companion—a minute of straining, tearing, striving breathlessness on her part, of dogged effort on the part of the suffering man, of perfect patience and helpfulness on the part of the horse—and at last they were at the place where they would be, and Charlotte Kennett could have cried with joy only to see him safely out of reach of the whirling snowflakes and the piercing wind.

But just now was not the right time for the display of weak emotion. While there was yet a few minutes of that twilight which is but the ghost of the departed day still left to her, she tramped out again into the open and gathered close-packed armfuls of the dead autumn bracken, which still clung thickly to the slopes and steeps on all sides. With these she built a fire—out of the hollow and round the angle of the rock, where Rhino would not see the flicker of the flames—and set it alight, hoping against hope that its glimmer might be seen from afar, and guide some of the searchers to her poor little camp.

Some more of the bracken she pressed closely round and piled high over the injured man, and presently she succeeded in getting Rhino to lie down close at his side, and the horse, too, she covered with the dry, brittle stuff high over his flanks, hoping thus to keep out the first keen edge of the night's bitterness. She gave the beast some weak brandy and water, mixing a little of the spirit with melted snow, and letting him draw it up out of her hollowed hands. It was not exactly as good as a warm mash, perhaps, but he recognized the fact that it was the best substitute she could manage, and nosed her over after it with every sign of gratitude.

It was well for them all that she had to be so busy as to preclude any idea of rest for herself. There was the fire to be kept replenished, and this necessitated constant tramps out and about in search of fuel, and there was a mouthful of brandy to be administered to the patient as often as he showed signs of consciousness. Once in her perambulations she came across a sheltered nook where the snow had not drifted, carpeted with dainty grass, which she plucked with her hands and carried down to the hungry Rhino. Another time she lost sight of her fire for a second or two, and imagining herself lost, and realizing

in a flash the horror of a night out there alone, she went sick with dread and terror. But the next moment the friendly little glimmer came into view again, and she rushed back to it with headlong speed, and was amazed to find how homelike it felt to be there by the poor little glow again, with Rhino's tail showing round the corner of the rock in the little hollow at her feet, and her stack of twigs and bracken close by in a convenient cleft out of reach of the snow.

For the snow still went on falling all the long night through.

By-and-by she found another occupation. As the patient's swoons grew less frequent he became more alive to his physical sufferings, and though he made no positive sign of what he was enduring, being anxious not to add to the manifold horrors of his guardian's position, her keen ear detected a change in his voice—a change from exhaustion to more acute suffering.

He had not known he had betrayed himself until she brought a bandage, improvised out of her own handkerchief and his cravat, and moistened with snow, and lifting his head on her knee, bound it lightly round his throbbing temples.

"That is heaven!" he sighed softly, and Rhino, seized perhaps with some sudden whim of jealousy, reached his slim nose forward and slid it insinuatingly into her unoccupied hand.

She sat there for some little time with the two heads on her knee, the man's face set and ashy gray, and the eyes firm closed in silent endurance; the brute's open and attentive, glancing here and there at the snowflakes falling beyond the shelter of the rock, as they caught the firelight and eddied about in fantastic swirls and rushes, as if in delighted gloating over the distress and calamity they beheld in the recess down there.

In that short pause from physical exertion she found herself imagining weird horrors. It seemed to her that this terrible experience was a punishment laid upon her for her sins, that this was no ordinary night, with its appointed hours of darkness and its inevitable finish at the approach of a new day. The fancy grew and intensified

within her that to this night there was to be no end, that they were to go on and on and on through dim, countless ages waiting in this little hollow for the morning which was never to dawn, waiting always, with no sound in their ears but the moaning and shrieking of the wind as it tore past the shoulder of the mountain behind them, no view within their vision but the whirling, eddying, shifting curtain of snowflakes, which seemed to have shut them off from the rest of the world for ever and ever.

The notion got such a hold upon her at last that she began to be afraid her senses were deserting her. She got up and moved about, trying to fight back this new terror, and then in her helplessness she put her hands together, and with the snow beating at her from all sides, and with the hurricane singing its threatening dirge in her ears, she prayed such a prayer as she had never before prayed in her life.

The mental exaltation of the effort calmed and steadied her, and with renewed courage she resumed her unwearied ministrations to the helpless man, her eager care of the fire, and her persuasive coaxings to the dumb member of the party whose store of animal heat had such a large share in saving Richard Evans' life that night.

And good was it for that same Richard Evans that Charlotte Kennett was no self-indulgent, pampered, sinewless miss of modern affectations, but a hardy, robust young creature, accustomed to enjoying the use of the muscles her Maker had bestowed upon her, and with a mind as free from fanciful failings as her body. Had it been otherwise she must inevitably have succumbed to the horrors which assailed her one after the other through the hours of that eternal night; and when in the dim, gray twilight of the autumn morning a party of searchers at last stumbled across the tiny camp under the rock the chances are that, instead of finding a survival of light vitality and warmth they might have found a harvest of death.

CHAPTER II.

IMPULSE *v.* INSTINCT.

COED-Y-BYCHWN had been kept as quiet as the grave all the day through. The servants had moved about the house as silently as ghosts, no gongs had been sounded. The guests had crept up and down the staircases with foot-falls of velvet and bated breath, and those among them who had used horses or carriages, though very few had cared to turn out after the night of sleepless anxiety they had passed through, had gone through the back of the house to the stables to mount, so that Charlotte Kennett's rest should not be broken by the passing of a wheel or a hoof-beat under her window.

And she had slept as it was right and proper she should sleep after such an ordeal as she had gone through. Perfect quiet, a hot bath, a double dose of strong soup, and a big sleep had been the doctor's prescription when she had reached the house at seven o'clock in the morning, and the prescription had been carried out to the letter, with the result that now, at four in the afternoon, she was sitting in the deep arm-chair in front of a blazing fire in her own room, wrapped in a cosy old crimson dressing-gown, and looking scarcely any the worse for her melodramatic adventure. She was so much her usual self that when her sister came stealing into the room to make her inquiries, with the footstep and general deportment which belong exclusively to sick-rooms, Charlotte received her with a gay little laugh.

"Don't do that, Milly, my dearest," she cried, "or I shall begin to think I am desperately bad. How beautifully quiet the house has been all day, or is it that I have slept through everything?"

Mrs. Rees stooped and kissed her with a warmth which was the outward expression of her very real relief.

"You are really a wonderful creature," she said admiringly. "I don't believe I know another woman who would have gone through such an ordeal and come out of it as

you have." She put her hand down as she spoke and turned Charlotte's face a little more to the window. "Looked at by this light, you scarcely even look paler than usual; there is just the shadow of fatigue under your eyes, *et voila tout!*"

"And why not?" asked Charlotte. "Did you expect I should have an attack of brain fever? I suppose I gave you all a rare fright, Milly?"

Mrs. Rees opened her eyes and clasped her hands and caught her breath. The little performance was more expressive than half an hour of words.

"I will tell you all about that by-and-by," she said. "What I came up about now was to see if you felt equal to a visitor?"

"A visitor?"

"Yes, or rather two. I hinted as strongly as I well could that it would be better to defer the visit for a day or two, but the poor thing is in such a state of emotion that it seemed cruel to pour cold water on her wish to see you."

"Who is it?"

"Mrs. Evans and one of her daughters."

"Oh, Milly, my child!"

"Yes, I knew you wouldn't like it, and I did my best, but—you see you must go through with it, sooner or later, Lotte. It's natural the poor soul should want to thank you; I should, myself, in her place. I'd get it over, and have done with it, if I were you."

"It will be simply awful!" said Charlotte despairingly; "but, as you say, there are her feelings to be thought of, too. Yes, I'll see her, and get it over."

Mrs. Rees turned as she moved toward the door.

"Will you have a lamp?"

"I think not; the twilight will be less embarrassing, less ceremonious. No, we will get our chat over in the half light."

But even so it was a rather trying little interview.

Mrs. Evans' emotions were so palpably beyond her powers of expression that that fact alone gave an overburdened feeling to the mental atmosphere. Charlotte felt insecure the whole time the grateful woman was in the room; she

felt that at any moment there might be a sudden upheaval of the forces at work, that at any instant she might be carried away by her agitation, and fling herself on her knees and seize the hands of her husband's preserver in hers, and cover them with her kisses and tears, and at this time in her life Charlotte Kennett was almost man-nish in her horror of a scene.

Another thing which made her uncomfortable was the good lady's habit of dragging in quotations from the Scriptures, doing it in such an odd, inconsequent fashion that Miss Kennett's strong distaste sometimes gave way suddenly to her sense of the ridiculous, and she was seized with a mad inclination to give way to immoderate laughter.

"If my tongue was the pen of a ready writer, Miss Kennett," she said, in a voice tremulous with deep feeling, and with brimming tears in her eyes, "I might perhaps be able to tell you how full my heart is of gratitude. Though, indeed, for that matter, how anybody's tongue could ever be turned into a pen was always a thing that puzzled me. For my part I would rather use my tongue than my pen any day, for if I'm a bad speaker I'm a worse writer, and if I ever try to express myself strongly in writing it always ends in so many blots and crossings-out that at last I forget myself what I meant to say. And indeed," she added, with sudden surprise at finding she had worked round to an appropriate remark promiscuously, "and indeed that is what I am doing now, Miss Kennett—I am forgetting what I wanted to say, though, as far as that goes, I could never say all I wanted if I went on trying without stopping for a month."

"Well, then, don't distress yourself by trying at all," put in Charlotte, with a gravity highly laudable under the circumstances. "You see, Mrs. Evans, I know so exactly what it is you want me to understand. You are anxious that I should know that you think I was very brave and good not to desert Mr. Evans on the hillside last night. Well, I do know that you think it, but—I'll tell you a little secret, you and your daughter, if you will both promise not to betray me to the whole world. The real honest truth is that I was not a bit brave at heart. My staying with him was really rather a proof of cowardice

than courage, for, all hurt as he was, poor soul, I felt his presence a protection against the terror of the night."

"And the cold bandage for his head, and the brandy, and covering him up with the bracken?"

"It all gave me occupation and helped me to pass the time, you know," said Charlotte rather apologetically.

"Oh, yes I know!" exclaimed Mrs. Evans, with a kind of fierceness. "I know that you are one of those good women whose price is above rubies, one of those whose virtues are a crown to her husband, or, at least, they will be when you have one. The crown is there, all the same, whether the husband is or not, and it's not your fault that he is not there to wear it." This was almost too much. Charlotte rose suddenly with some wild idea of flight, and catching sight, over her mother's shoulder, of Miss Evans' face in the background, sat down again as suddenly, and composed her face with stern decorum. "Of course we are taking up your time," continued Mrs. Evans, putting her own construction on the impetuous action. "I was forgetting that you must be tired. But one forgets most things when one's heart is full of just one feeling—full to the brim, pressed down and running over, as mine is with gratitude. We will bid you good-night, Miss Kennett. Meg, bid Miss Kennett good-night, and if you can say a word on your own account, do. I'm surprised that you haven't found anything to say, you that's your father's favorite child, too."

"I hope you won't trouble to do anything of the sort," said Charlotte, putting out her hand to the girl, who came forward with a certain shrinking reluctance, which appeared to Miss Kennett to be caused by her consciousness of her mother's trying manner. When the girl drew near her she was surprised to discover how pretty and refined she was in looks and manner—surprised, because Mrs. Evans scarcely impressed one as being likely to have dainty daughters. But, then, she was very young, scarcely more than a child, and perhaps the dim light flattered her a little, too. In another few years the chances were that she would be more like her mother's daughter. "I hope you won't trouble to do anything of the sort, Miss Evans," said Charlotte, with a hand outstretched in friendly warmth.

"It will please me far more if you leave your word unsaid."

"Yes, I know exactly," answered Miss Evans, in a low, shaken voice, which yet had no signs of her mother's tremulousness about it. "I know how a generous person always hates to be thanked, and words are such empty things. If I could only do something for you, Miss Kennett, if it could only come in my way to be able to serve you, in ever such a little thing, how glad I should be, and how proud!"

"Foolish child!" cried Charlotte, touched curiously by some note of vivid intensity in the low, quivering voice, the close pressure of the small, trembling fingers, "foolish, romantic little girl!"

Miss Kennett was anything but a demonstrative woman, but some impulse of liking for this Welsh farmer's daughter prompted her to do a rather unusual thing; she drew the eager, earnest little face down and kissed it.

"I don't wonder you are your father's favorite child," she said, smiling into the shining eyes, which looked so beautiful with the leaping flame-light dancing in them; "I should make a favorite of you, too, if I saw much of you. Good-night."

Mrs. Rees returned to her sister's room as soon as she knew her visitors had left her.

"Did they worry you very much?" she asked. "Did Mrs. Evans shower religious blessings on you? She is a red-hot Methodist, like all the people about here. Did she make herself much of a nuisance?"

"She might possibly have been worse," Charlotte admitted. "She was intensely funny. I very nearly laughed in her face once. I believe I should have done, only the daughter seemed so distressingly conscious of her mother's absurdities."

"Oh, was that it? I wondered why she was so reluctant to come up."

"Was she reluctant?"

"Yes. She wanted to stay down-stairs and send her mother up alone."

"Shy, perhaps."

"Well, I should scarcely call Margaret Evans shy, as a

rule. At any rate, she is not shy with the men. Evans gave the shooting party a luncheon down at the farm two or three weeks ago, and they all came home full of this child's prettiness and fascination. This is her first year home from school, I believe, and her father is very proud of her. Tom says they had terrible scenes with her last night, when her father's mare came home to the stable in the height of the snow-storm without him."

"It must have been an awful night for them," Charlotte said feelingly.

"Awful? I should think so!" answered the other with meaning. "It was awful for us all. I don't believe a soul in the house here went to bed properly. Every time one of the searching parties came back there was a flock of dressing-gowns crowded around the top of the staircase. I believe Mrs. Pell never took herself to pieces at all——"

"Now, Milly!"

"Well, my dear, if I don't make fun of something I shall not be able to talk about it without crying——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't do that."

"No, I don't want to, if I can help it. But you know I can't look at you without feeling that I want to hug you and howl over you."

"My dear, I hope you won't."

"No, I won't, because I know you don't like fuss; but all the same, Lotte, we were all worked up to a tremendous pitch last night. I had a narrow shave of hysterics myself, when Tom's party came back the second time, at three o'clock this morning, without a sign of news of you, and as for Mirfield—well, simply, I never saw a man in such a state of agitation."

"Now then, Milly!"

"He was!" said Milly, with a sudden touch of assertion. "I tell you he was almost out of his mind with anxiety."

Miss Kennett turned her face toward the fire with a quick movement which was almost suggestive of irritation.

"Can't you let that drop, Milly?" she said.

Mrs. Rees looked at her beseechingly, and there was a touch of disappointment also in the look.

With all Charlotte Kennett's pleasant outspokenness, it was not an easy thing to work one's-self into her confidence

on those rare occasions when she chose to be reticent, and this question of Lord Mirfield's feeling for her, and hers for him, was just one of those rare occasions. She and Mirfield had spent the last month at Coed-y-Bychwn, and yet this was the first chance Mrs. Rees had had since their arrival of making an allusion to the matter which had lain so near her heart all the time.

And she had hoped so much from this visit, too.

Ever since Charlotte and Mirfield had been boy and girl together it had been a pet scheme between the heads of the two families that, by means of the young people, the rich estate of Kennett's Wold should in time become a part of the family belongings of the Earls of Netley.

The youngsters had always shown a strong partiality for each other, ever since the day when Charlotte had started a course of classical reading at Netley Fallow with the two Mirfield boys and their new tutor, Mr. Abney Garth.

Arthur Mirfield, the younger son of the earl, did not care for the classics, Lionel and Charlotte did, and it came about as a natural consequence that they found one another's society congenial at this period of their lives.

Mrs. George Mirfield, the earl's sister-in-law, who had established herself in Netley village—much to Lord Netley's annoyance—was the first person to remark upon the young people's liking for one another, and to hint at its probable consequence, and, much as Lord Netley was given to object to any plan which originated with his brother's widow, he could not be blind to the advantages of such a marriage.

The idea once started, the two fathers had taken to it very kindly indeed, and from that time forward no legitimate opportunity for increasing the intimacy had been neglected.

And yet, in spite of everything, the affair had not come to its expected crisis, and Charlotte was now on the verge of twenty-five.

Mrs. Rees, two years younger, and already a wife of two years' standing, was secretly much distressed by the present state of things.

That Charlotte, with her fine fortune—for Miss Kennett was her father's heiress—her charming face and figure, and

her grand disposition, should be wasting all the best years of her life, seemed to the happy little wife and mother absolute sacrilege.

It was some faint hope of bringing things to a climax which had led Mrs. Rees to invite the two interested parties for a longer stay than usual this year, and yet they had been in the house a month, showing all the time the same partiality as ever for one another's society, and things seemed to be just where they had been seven years ago.

Whose fault was it? Mrs. Rees was asking of herself as she sat and watched her sister's face in the firelight, feeling very much snubbed by that last request to "let that drop." Was it Charlotte's own fault, or was it Mirfield's?

If Lotte would only be a little more like other young women, if she would only let one get a glimpse of her real feeling on the subject. She must care a little for Mirfield, else why had she steadily refused all other offers, why did she so openly show that she preferred his attentions before all others?

And yet she would not hear a word on the subject, and openly derided any allusion to his interest in her!

It was very perplexing, little Mrs. Rees decided, very perplexing, and exceedingly disappointing to have all her hopes dashed by Lotte's refusal to move hand or foot in the matter.

"I almost begin to think, Lotte," she began again, after that long pause in the cosy firelight, "I am really inclined to fancy that you must have some settled crotchet in your head about poor Mirfield. My dear girl," she added, with a touch of expostulation in her manner, as the other twitched her head away again, "I really think you ought to let me say my say this once. You have never treated us fairly over this business, Lotte. A girl has no right to go on year after year, as you have done, being so friendly to a man if she doesn't care enough for him to marry him."

Charlotte shifted her fair, well-shaped head again, as if the padding of the chair was causing her some discomfort, and Mrs. Rees, seeing she meant to make no further reply, took heart of grace and went on:

"What I object to most of all is your inconsistency.

You are so contradictory—you will let Mirfield do more for you than any other man in the world, you allow him to devote himself to you for weeks at a stretch, and yet when I hint that he showed a little ordinary anxiety about you, you choose to pooh-pooh the idea, as if——”

“Oh, ordinary anxiety, I dare say,” put in Charlotte; “but you were insinuating that his anxiety was a different sort of thing to anybody else’s, you know, Milly.”

“And so it was,” said Milly stoutly; “he was up and down between here and the farm half a dozen times. He was nearly beside himself.”

“I think you are exaggerating, Milly—unintentionally, perhaps——”

“I am not exaggerating the least bit, Lotte. Why do you find it so difficult to believe? Is it because he is not effusive in a general way? I wish you had seen him for yourself. Perhaps it needed something of this kind to make him know his own mind. You would hardly have known him last night—I hardly knew him myself.”

There was another pause in the firelit room, during which Milly kept her eyes on the thoughtful face opposite her. What was the hitch between those two? She would have given a great deal to know.

“Lotte,” she said at last, with a sudden impetuosity which brought Miss Kennett out of her fit of abstraction with a start, “Lotte, I do wish for once you’d open out and tell me what it is that has stood between you and Mirfield all these years!”

Charlotte seemed to catch some spark of her heat, and answered instantly, on impulse:

“It is just that I don’t believe he cares for me as I care for him, and I can imagine no such hell upon earth as to live with a man you love and find out gradually that he does not love you. Now, Milly, you’ve got it.”

“Then—he has proposed, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes; he has proposed twice. You don’t suppose that masterful old man at The Fallow would have allowed things to go on as they have been going all these years if he could have altered it?”

“How do you mean, Lotte?”

“I mean that he commanded Mirfield to propose to me,

and, like the dutiful son that he is, Mirfield carried out his father's orders."

Mrs. Rees made an impatient little movement with her hands and shoulders.

"You are a most incomprehensible creature," she said. "You confess you care for the man, you refuse all other offers for his sake—I suppose it is for his sake—and yet when he asks you you refuse him. Do you mean to live single all your life for the sake of a mere whim?"

"A whim?" echoed Miss Kennett. Her little touch of hurry was over now, and she had returned to her previous manner, perhaps she was even regretting her candor. "A whim?" she repeated, as if she were weighing the full meaning of the word. "If I could think it was only a whim, Milly! If I could persuade myself into believing that Mirfield proposed to me for any better reason than because he thought it was expected of him under the circumstances."

"I wish, with all my heart, you could have seen him last night, Lotte."

"Well," she said, with a slight laugh at her own expense, "if it would have done anything toward convincing me that I have been mistaken in his feeling for me all this time, I wish it too. I'm afraid I am only too open to conviction on that point, Milly."

There was something in the manner of the words that made Mrs. Rees feel a touch of pity for the speaker. It was a feeling so out of keeping with its object that she was surprised at it; it seemed so out of place to pity Charlotte.

"It is a whim, Lotte," she reiterated, as she rose in answer to the first bell; "as surely as you live, it is nothing but a whim. He cares for you as much as it is in him to care for anybody. He is not a man of heroic emotions, but I should think he could be tender and true and loyal, and Heaven knows that ought to satisfy any woman in these days. Be sensible, dear, and make up your mind to be happy."

Miss Kennett recalled the phrase two or three times while she was dressing.

On this occasion she wondered whether the two things were synonymous. Would it be sensible to allow herself to

be happy in this particular way? She was afraid with a great fear, and yet—and yet how hard her heart pleaded to be heard against her better judgment.

When she appeared in the drawing-room she found, a little to her own quiet amusement, that she was to be made the heroine of. It was what Mrs. Rees called a “neighbors’ night,” and the room was pretty full.

As she reached the doorway a group of men talking near her stopped their conversation abruptly and came toward her. The movement drew general attention that way, and the result was a kind of triumphal entry, with all eyes on her, amid an odd little hush of expectation.

Rees’ nephew, Harry Carthews, just home from his first term at Eton, found the opportunity irresistible. Jumping up on to the ottoman, as Charlotte came near the middle of the room, he threw his hand above his head and shouted out in shrill excitement, “Three cheers for the plucky heroine of Bryn-mawr.”

There was a huge shout of laughter from the whole room, but the little chap’s eager enthusiasm was like the spark to the train, and when he sung out, “Now then, gentlemen, take your time from me, and let it go free! Hip, hip, hooray!” there was a swift uprising of all the men in the room, and Charlotte stood laughing, with her hands over her ears to shut out the deafening din.

The next moment everybody came crowding round her, all conventionality cast aside in the genuine emotion of the little incident, each eager to shake her hand and offer their word of congratulation on her courage and escape.

“I really quite enjoyed it,” said Mrs. Pell, later on, to her confidante of the hour—Mrs. Pell’s life was passed in making confidences—“it gave one quite a little thrill for the moment. I wish such moments were more frequent; life would be better worth living. Repose of manner is a very good thing in its way, but I think its way would be better if it did not tend so inevitably to the repression of all feeling—the good as well as the bad and the indifferent.” Which remark had perhaps a shade more real meaning in it than Mrs. Pell’s remarks had as a general rule.

Lord Mirfield had only just reached the drawing-room door when young Harry gave the time for those lusty

cheers—he had volunteered to see Mrs. Evans and her daughter safely home and bring back the latest news of Evans' condition, and was late in consequence—and so it happened that his hand-shake and congratulations to Charlotte came among the last.

When Charlotte felt his hand-clasp and met his glance she saw at once that Milly had been right—the whole affair had stirred him very deeply—and if his emotions were not of an heroic type they were genuine, and at times even impressive.

Charlotte had never felt this so much as now, when he stood with her hand in his, and his beautiful violet eyes, deep and glowing with the thrill of the moment, full upon her face.

“There have been times,” he said, “in the last twenty-four hours when I believed I should never hold your hand again. They were terrible times, Charlotte—very terrible.”

Charlotte felt this new depth was what she had always needed in his manner, and the keen joy of it turned her a little pale. He saw it at once.

“All this excitement is too much for you,” he exclaimed penitently. “It is selfish of us all not to have more consideration for you. Let us find a quiet corner for a few minutes.”

The other folks all fell away, as they had a habit of doing when those two got together, and Mirfield took her off to an inner room, where the light, seen through the opening in the curtains, was more subdued, and there was a general air of seclusion, which was yet not unsociable.

“I can never tell you what I went through last night,” he said as they moved away, “never! Words would not do it! And then, when I heard that you were safe, and again, when I listened to the story of your bravery and endurance—Mrs. Evans has been telling me about it—it made my heart burn. The whole thing has lifted me out of myself as I never thought anything would. We have always been a great deal to each other, you and I, why won't you let us be even more, Charlotte? Why won't you give me the proud right to stand up before the world and say, ‘This splendid creature belongs to me’? It would make me so proud—so proud and happy.”

"If I were only sure of that," she said, speaking less steadily than usual. She had not sat down in the chair he had placed for her. They were standing side by side, with their shoulders toward the other room, and though Mirfield was not a short man, their shoulders were on a level. "If I were only sure of that," she said, and looked very earnestly indeed at him.

"Sure?" he cried, under his breath. "Why, aren't you sure, then? But you must be, you must indeed! It would be the happiest time in my life the moment in which you consented to marry me."

"Then, Lionel," she answered, with that full look still on him, "you may count this the happiest time in your life."

"My dearest girl!" he murmured. "Is it possible, at last!"

"Hush!" she murmured; "they are making the move for dinner." And even in the first hurry of that moment she was conscious of a suspicion that the interruption was not unwelcome to him, and asked herself that question again, "Will it be sensible to be happy in this particular way?"

But she soon found that, sensible or not, she was to be given no chance of drawing back.

Before the ladies had thoroughly settled themselves for their quiet half-hour after dinner Milly was fetched out of the room, and when she came back she went straight up to her sister and put her hands on her shoulders and kissed her on both cheeks.

"I am so glad, Lotte," she said emotionally, "so very glad to think that it came off here after all, though, even now, I don't believe you two absurd creatures would have made up your minds if you had not had your phlegm broken up by the excitement we've been going through. Yes, she has consented to make Mirfield a happy man at last," she continued, turning to the questioning face of the lady next her; "and now that it is a *fait accompli* I am consumed by a desire to shake her for keeping her patient adorer so long in suspense."

Charlotte felt all this was very hurried. The influences of the moment had driven them out of their usual pace.

Although she had outwardly kept her head, she knew that she had herself been carried along by that absurd little scene before dinner. But there was no backing out now. And, after all, perhaps it might turn out for the best. Only, she would have felt more contented if she had not known in her inmost heart that but for her last night's adventure she would not have been to-night the betrothed of Lord Mirfield. She did not like feeling that her engagement had been brought about by the merest accident; it was hurtful to her dignity.

But if the hurt to her dignity had only stopped there!

Although until now people had always wondered why Miss Kennett did not marry Lord Mirfield, no sooner was the engagement made known than they began to take exception to the arrangement.

It was odd, they said, that a woman of Charlotte Kennett's calibre should care for a man of Mirfield's want of character—a dreamer, a visionary, an idler, a purposeless person who had inherited his father's taste for intellectual pursuits without the mental strength or vigor to put it to as good a use.

There were those who were vulgar enough to say that the prospective countess-ship had had weight in helping Miss Kennett's decision; but this was only the opinion of those who knew nothing of Charlotte personally—people who were acquainted with her were hardly likely to make such a blunder.

The day following the engagement it was decided that Charlotte should return to Yorkshire at once. In the little local weekly paper there had appeared an over-colored account of her night with Mr. Evans on the mountain; there was even a line or two crowded in at the end in which reference was made to "the scene of unprecedented enthusiasm which greeted the fearless heroine's reappearance among her friends in the evening."

"I had better get out of it all," Charlotte said; "I can't stand being made a public character of."

So it was settled that she should hurry her departure by a few days, and the next morning Mrs. Rees and Lord Mirfield drove into Wrexham with her to see her off.

"I think it is very cruel of you not to let me see you

safe home," Mirfield said; but Charlotte would not have it so.

"I particularly want you to stay behind for a few days, to send me regular accounts of Mr. Evans' progress," she told him. "Go down yourself, if you can make time, and find out how he is getting on. I shall be really anxious, and I could not lay my commands on any one else in the same way, you know."

Of course, when it was put to him that way, further remonstrance was out of the question. And so Mirfield remained at Coed-y-Bychwn, and his *fiancée* went on alone to impart her news to her father, feeling happier in her own mind as she remembered that, however much she might doubt the wisdom of her decision, it could produce nothing but sincere gratification among the members of her family.

CHAPTER III.

THE STRONG WILL WINS.

LORD NETLEY received the news of his son's betrothal with unmixed satisfaction. He was so roused out of himself that for the moment even his absorbing translations from the classics lost their interest for him.

When his secretary—that same Abney Garth who had come to The Fallow seven years ago as classical tutor to the Mirfield boys—joined him at the usual hour in his study he found his employer more disposed for talk than work.

This Mr. Garth was scarcely an every-day young man. Eight years ago, at his father's death, at which time Abney was reading for the bar, he had discovered that the estate left to him was barely solvent. The lawyers had suggested a compromise with his father's creditors, but when the young man found that, by pinching and screwing, he could pay the full twenty shillings in the pound he had decided to do it.

Youthful quixotry the lawyers had called it; but it was Abney Garth's last folly of the kind. Perhaps in that one big effort he had exhausted his store of that quality; be

that as it may, nobody ever accused Abney Garth of enthusiasm or romance again. Some people said his disappointment had soured him, and yet he was not a morose man by any means, only grave and self-contained to the verge of stoicism.

As young men his father and Lord Netley had been in the same set at Oxford, and when he had found himself suddenly face to face with the hard necessity of earning his living he had written to the earl, bespeaking his influence, and the earl had been very glad to secure his services on his own behalf, for the young man had already shown some signs of sound classical scholarship, and for that branch of learning Lord Netley had an old-fashioned admiration.

So at twenty-two Abney Garth had come to Netley Fallow to read the classics with the earl's sons and Miss Kennett, and to help the earl himself with his learned labors, and there he had remained ever since, an unobtrusive but highly esteemed member of the household, who, in the midst of other interests, lived a life of his own, apart—a life of hard work, of eager hopes and burning ambitions, unsuspected and undreamed of by those about him.

And yet he was not wanting in sympathy, only his very sympathy was of that quiet, self-contained kind which gains the least credit even while it is the most trusted in.

This morning, for instance, he saw at once, when Lord Netley entered the study, that something had happened to disturb the level, studious calm of the last few weeks. But, as was usual with him, he waited until his lordship chose to speak, and his lordship was too full of elation to keep him waiting long.

Garth received the information of his old pupil's engagement exactly as he should have received it, with a certain quiet interest in the fact itself, and a touch of congratulation for his lordship personally on the accomplishment of the wish he had so often given expression to.

"You are right, Garth," he answered genially. "I am quite as much to be congratulated as the young people themselves. Thank Heaven that one of my sons has at last done a sensible thing! I began to be afraid that Mirfield was going to do no more real good with his life than his brother."

Garth received this remark with a discreet silence. Arthur Mirfield's follies and vices were a by-word everywhere but in his father's presence. If he chose to spend his time and his small independent fortune among the actors and actresses of the minor theatres—with an occasional music-hall "star" thrown in—nobody had the power to prevent him. It was a matter for very great regret, but a matter which purposeless discussion could not possibly improve.

"But I have real hopes for Mirfield now," Lord Netley began again, too much and too pleasantly occupied with his own anticipations to notice Garth's unresponsiveness. "With such a woman as Miss Kennett at his elbow he may do a lot yet. But they must not lose any more time. Now that she has at last made up her mind, there is no need for any further delay. Where are we now? In the middle of November? Well, there is no reason why the marriage should not take place quite early in the new year—quite early—so that they may be back in town and take their stand from the beginning of the season. I shall drive over and see Mr. Kennett, and put the business part of the arrangement into training this afternoon," he continued, warming up to his subject as he went on, "and Miss Charlotte must do her share of hurry with the milliners and dressmakers too. You shall write to Gillow's at once, Abney, about overhauling the house in Curzon Street; they had better start immediately. There will be plenty to do, and we will have it done thoroughly while we're about it. Perhaps Mirfield will begin to take life seriously now—leave off his dreary scribblings and go in for a dose of hard work. This pottering among books and papers is all very well for a man who has done his fair share of fighting, as I have, but it's a bad sign to see the young ones taking to it. We must get him into the House—at least," he added, with a sudden dash of bitterness in his tone, "we will try to get him there, if there is still a seat left unappropriated by the fraternity of buttermen and cobblers, and meantime Charlotte can start her campaign in Curzon Street from the opening of the session. That is one advantage we still have over the butter people, Abney—our womenkind. As Lady Mirfield Miss Kennett will make a mark; I should

not wonder if the house in Curzon Street recovered some of the reputation it enjoyed under the Derby administration. It was one of the acknowledged rallying-grounds of the party in those days, Abney; it would be the greatest pleasure left to me to see it restored to that position."

It was curious, and a little pitiful, to see how the old fighting instinct came atop at the first faint possibility of a return to the arena. Garth noticed it without being able to comprehend it. In his estimation latter-day politics meant, as a pursuit, everything that was mean and vulgar and dreary, to all but the leaders themselves. The real old party spirit seemed altogether a thing of the past, and any attempt to revive it appeared to him to be pretty much on a level with the operation of thrashing a dead donkey.

With the more personal part of the business, however, he felt a warm interest, and when Lord Netley returned presently to the question of refurnishing, and began to dictate a letter to the upholsterers, he ventured upon a quiet remonstrance.

"Do you think it would perhaps be better to wait until you have seen Miss Kennett before you send Gillow his instructions?" he asked.

"No, I do not," the old man answered decisively. "We have done waiting enough. Miss Kennett has definitely accepted Mirfield, and she has known him ever since childhood. She cannot possibly want more time for consideration."

Garth drew the paper toward him and dipped his pen in the ink.

"Of course I am wholly inexperienced in these matters," he said, with a slight unreadable smile which left one wondering whether he considered his inexperience a matter for congratulation or regret; "but I had an impression that the lady was always consulted on the question of date."

"And so she shall be," returned the earl, showing a touch of petulance; "she shall choose her own day of the week, and the week itself, so long as she does not defer it beyond the end of February—what more can she want? Confound your superior judgment, Abney Garth!" he exclaimed in sudden good-natured impatience, when the other made no reply. "I wish you would drop that habit

of always putting the other party in the wrong and leaving them there. But we can't really do any harm by writing to Gillow for his estimate, you know, and I should like to feel we had made a start."

Garth said nothing more. When his lordship had made up his mind opposition only confirmed him in it.

The letter to Gillow was posted that night.

And that day three months the engagement stood just as it had stood at the beginning.

Christmas had come and gone, Miss Kennett had been at home, quietly busy among her father's people, and beyond that first brief announcement to his father Mirfield had made no sign.

Most of the time they had hardly known where he was, his letters having been sent to his London club and forwarded on thence.

Lord Netley was furious, Mr. Kennett icily indignant, and yet they could neither of them do anything, because Charlotte insisted that Mirfield should not be interfered with.

"This is my affair," she said to the two angry old men. "If I don't complain, nobody else has any right to. Mirfield and I understand one another thoroughly, and if anybody else attempts to interfere between us I will put an end to the engagement at once."

After this decided declaration it seemed that there was nothing more to be said upon the subject; and things went on week after week without change, until February was well in.

And then something happened which pricked the bubble of Lord Netley's brooding anger, and caused an explosion which successfully bore down all opposition whatsoever.

Arthur Mirfield, the reprobate, capped his two years' folly by a marriage with some unfortunate young woman who earned her living at one of the "over-the-water" theatres in London. And, as if this were not bad enough, he attained the *comble* of his foolhardiness by sending a copy of *The Morning Post* to his father, with the announcement of the marriage underlined in red ink.

"On the 3d inst., Arthur Mirfield, second son of the

Earl of Netley, to Molly de Courcy, formerly of the Camel and Howdar Theatre. No cards."

The old man's rage was something awful to witness. Even Abney Garth was terrified when he entered his lordship's bedroom, in compliance with the entreaty of the alarmed valet, and found him walking about in his dressing-gown and slippers, with the fragments of the paper in his shaking hand, unable to speak coherently, scarcely conscious in his consuming anger of anything but his own impotent frenzy.

Garth's first fear was paralysis; but the crisis passed, and left the enraged man still in command of his senses.

The first burst of rage past, his more enduring anger, unreasonably enough, fixed itself on his eldest son. In some inconsequent fashion he jumped to the conclusion that, because his second son had disgraced himself over his matrimonial affairs, his eldest son was likely to repeat the *fiasco*.

As soon as his hand was steady enough to hold the pen, he composed and despatched a telegram to Mirfield, commanding his immediate return home, at all costs and under any and every circumstance, unless he wished to be denied his father's presence as long as he lived.

This message happened to catch Lord Mirfield in town, and he wired back directly that he would be with his father that night.

On receipt of this Lord Netley at once drove over to Kennett's Wold, and persuaded Charlotte to accompany him back to The Fallow for a few days' stay, to "comfort him in the trouble that had fallen upon him."

This she did in all good faith, unaware of her lover's expected arrival.

At nine o'clock, when Charlotte was safely in the drawing-room, beyond the sound of his arrival, Mirfield came, and was taken at once to the earl in the study.

Without beating about the bush at all, without even wasting time over a word of the most ordinary greeting, Lord Netley went straight to his point.

"Well, you've heard of your brother's social suicide, I suppose? Married a ballet girl, or some lady from the

same dainty class. I sent for you because it seemed to me there was every chance of your coming to the same kind of thing if somebody did not put out a hand to bring you back to your proper place. We will have no more of this blackguardism in the family, if you please. You will marry Charlotte Kennett this day week. For God's sake let us have one respectable woman in the family!"

The news of his brother's marriage had a most extraordinary effect upon Mirfield, or perhaps it was the command to get married at once which overwhelmed him. He went the color of death, lips and all, and put his hand on the back of a chair near him as if he felt the need of some support.

"It is all a mistake," he said, speaking as if he were short of breath. "Where did you get your information? Somebody has been lying, as usual."

"There is no mistake at all," answered his father. "The paper containing the announcement was sent to me this morning, addressed in your brother's handwriting. She was a Miss de Montmorency, or some elegant name of the sort, and she came from one of the Tom and Jerry theatres across the water. They took the trouble to announce the whole honorable genealogy in the paper. We won't waste any further words on them, if you please. I sent for you to arrange the date of your own wedding, not to discuss theirs. What with your cousin George's scoundrelism, and with a butcher's daughter"—this was his habitual way of describing his brother's widow, whose father had been an army meat contractor—"and a ballet girl already in the family, it is time we made an effort to save ourselves from social annihilation. Your marriage with Miss Kennett will take place without any further delay. What do you say to this day week?"

"It is impossible," said Mirfield, "utterly impossible. You must give me more time."

He was still holding on to the chair-back, and breathing as if he had been running a race, and though he spoke with unmistakable emphasis he made no attempt to meet his father's eye.

Lord Netley looked across at his down-bent face for a second or two in silence. What he saw, or thought he

saw, in his son's attitude Heaven alone knows, but whatever it was, it swept away his last shred of self-command, and there followed a scene which made Abney Garth, without personal interest as he seemed in the matter, draw his breath quickly in dread of what might happen next.

The old man's speech was not loud, it was scarcely more rapid than usual. His anger was too intense for bluster; it was at a still, white glow—a heat ten times as intense as that from flickering flames.

Even Garth shivered once or twice as he listened to the bitter, biting words, and but for his lifelong policy of non-interference he would have yielded to the impulse of the moment and thrown himself between the infuriated old man and his pallid-faced listener.

Between two such temperaments such a scene could only end one way—in the submission of the weaker. Mirfield's opposition melted like wax before the heat of his father's passion.

"It is enough, sir," he said, when at last he had a chance to speak; "more than enough. I leave myself in your hands—in yours and Charlotte's, that is," he added, as if the remembrance of Miss Kennett brought him some fragment of hope at the last moment.

But Lord Netley was ruthless in his hour of victory.

"Then," he returned instantly, "we will settle the matter out of hand at once. No, don't sit down," for Mirfield had turned the chair toward him and seated himself with an air of exhaustion. "There is nothing like striking while the iron is hot. Charlotte is in the drawing-room. We will go and get her to fix the day this instant, and go to bed afterward with a good conscience."

Garth, watching the two of them leave the room, saw Mirfield spread his hands out with a quick, spasmodic gesture, as if something in his father's words had probed him to the quick, and the action left a curiously vivid impression on his mind, its resignation was so nearly akin to despair.

Lord Netley had his own way in the drawing-room as he had had it in the library, only it was significant of the old diplomatist's wiliness that in this second interview he altogether altered his tactics.

With Miss Kennett he threw himself on her mercy, bore heavily on the blow he had already sustained that day, and appealed to her goodness of heart by declaring that she had it in her power to greatly lessen the shock.

Once again, under the impulse of the moment, Charlotte Kennett yielded against her better judgment, and allowed that day three weeks to be fixed for the wedding.

And that day three weeks the wedding took place, after a breathless period of insufficient preparation, of lawyers' interviews, of hurried journeys to town, of striving, pushing, driving bustle, which left nobody a chance for an hour of quiet thought until it was over and done with and the proverbially happy pair were safely off on their short honeymoon.

Then at last Lord Netley knew a moment's peace. He dismounted guard, as it were, and with a sigh of satisfaction tossed aside his lilies of the valley and his light kid gloves and went directly back to his study and his classical translations.

"Thank God, that is over!" he said, fingering a pile of manuscript with caressing touches, as if he felt he owed it compensation for the neglect of the past weeks. "Now at last I feel safe! Every since the day was fixed I have been haunted by a foreboding that something would happen to interfere with the marriage after all, and I had set my heart on having one respectable woman in the family. Now then, Abney, how far shall we go back to pick up the thread again?"

The secretary came forward in his tranquil fashion and took his usual place at the table. He was looking paler than he had looked three weeks ago, and there was a touch of haggardness under his eyes, and a strained look in the eyes themselves which suggested a long succession of sleepless nights. Perhaps these weeks of unusual bustle had thrown his nerves out of order.

"Thank God it is over!" said his lordship again, and Garth may have repeated the phrase to himself even more fervently, and with greater cause.

"Yes; thank God it is over!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE STORY BEGINS.

It was nearly two years and a half since Lord Netley had congratulated himself so unreservedly on his son's marriage with Miss Kennett, and though his anticipations of a return of political power to the house of Mirfield had not been fulfilled, in all other respects he saw no reason but one to be dissatisfied with the alliance. And this one reason was likely to be rectified in time. At present there was no direct male heir to the title; the only child of the marriage was a girl—Baby Daisy—now about eighteen months old.

To Lord Netley, living the life of his choice among his books and papers, it seemed that the marriage had turned out everything one could wish, always with the reservation concerning Mirfield's political career; but then, absorbed as he was in his literary occupations, Lord Netley saw less of what was going on round him than most people, and there were those, even in The Fallow household itself, who read between the lines of Charlotte's married life and recognized the fact that all was not quite as it should be between her husband and her.

Outwardly those two years and a half had had very little effect upon Lady Mirfield. Her laugh, perhaps, did not come quite so readily as of old, and the set of the lips may have been a trifle closer, the smile a touch less flexible than before her marriage; but these are changes that come to most people sooner or later, and they were so slight that of themselves they would scarcely have created notice.

To people of an observant nature, however, there were other signs and tokens, which told their own tale unmistakably enough. Lord Mirfield had not grown domesticated after his marriage, as men of his type usually do when they are fortunate enough to mate with women who adore them. Before his honeymoon was well over he had shown an impatience and a distaste for home life, which had aroused Abney Garth's secret indignation and set Mrs.

George Mirfield openly wondering. This, however, Charlotte soon put an end to in her direct, outspoken way, and in the presence of Mirfield's wife Mrs. George had to check her uncharitable surmises on the subject of Mirfield's constant absences from home.

At the beginning it had been his literary occupations which had called him up to town every now and then, but later on he had discovered a sudden and rabid taste for yachting—Charlotte was the worst sailor in the world—and had started a yacht of his own. Henceforth he spent a good half of his time afloat, and sometimes for a fortnight at a stretch his wife would not have known how to communicate with him in the event of any sudden emergency.

Things were in this condition at the end of the third July since their marriage. Lady Mirfield had left town for Netley Fallow before the end of the season because Baby Daisy had seemed to be pining in the hot London streets. Mirfield had, as usual, remained behind, and it was now ten days since Charlotte had known anything definite of her husband's whereabouts. She had never unclosed her lips on the subject, but Garth knew well enough why she was down-stairs morning after morning in time to receive the post-bag herself from the hands of the messenger, and though he was always especially careful to be out of the way on these occasions he knew quite well by the tone of her "Good morning" what luck she had had in her daily dip into the lucky bag.

That remarkable self-control of his stood him in good stead during this part of his life; the faintest touch of significance in word or look, the slightest suggestion of sympathy on his part, and there would have been an end of the strong friendship between these two. But the suggestion was never made, and the friendship remained unbroken, and Lady Mirfield turned instinctively to Garth whenever she found herself in any difficulty which could, in the fitness of things, be shared with another.

That she was in some such difficulty now he guessed at once as he caught sight of her hurrying up the bridle-path which led directly from the village to the house.

He had seen her leave the house by that path a quarter of an hour ago, and knew as well as if she had told him

that she was too impatient to wait the postman's appearance at the door, and had gone to meet him. And if the whole truth must be told, Garth had taken up his post by the open window of the breakfast-room purposely to watch for her return, for in these days of her suspense and anxiety, in seeing her suffer he went through almost as much as she did, and was always glad for her sake when the morning's fever of expectation was over.

This morning, however, he saw instantly that something out of the common had occurred, and waited with an impatience which was not allowed to betray itself by so much as the tightening of a muscle until she should come and impart her information.

Nevertheless, when he turned at the sound of her footstep outside the door, and saw her in the open doorway, with a heavily-bordered letter in her hand, his sternly schooled heart gave such a leap within him that he paused affrighted at its obvious meaning. Had things come to this pass with him, that he rejoiced at the prospect of a fellow-creature's death?

The next moment he knew his iniquitous hope was without foundation.

"Abney," said Lady Mirfield, coming hastily forward, with the letter held out toward him, "do you know anything at all of Arthur's whereabouts? This letter has the Rouen postmark, and another which looks like Leuville. Isn't Leuville on the Normandy coast? And did Mrs. Watson say something about having come across Arthur, and his wife and baby boy, at some out-of-the-way little fishing village in Normandy last summer? I am dreadfully afraid something terrible has happened. Arthur would not have allowed his father to be written to while he was alive. And see how it is addressed, too—"To the Honorable Lord de Netley"—a French address evidently. What shall we do?"

"We can do nothing, Lady Mirfield," he answered. "Lord Netley would resent the slightest interference with his correspondence. We must send the letter up with the others, and let things take their course."

"Must we really? It seems cruel to let a blow fall like that; and it will be a blow. He has spoken once or twice

lately of the misery of family estrangements, and, of course, I knew what he meant. Don't you think for once you might venture to intrude on the seclusion of his breakfast hour and prepare him a little?"

At the suggestion there flashed before his mind the memory of the only other time he had ever seen the Earl of Netley in *deshabille*—the morning he had received the news of his younger son's marriage. Garth remembered that, even in the midst of the *excitement and emotion* of that day, his employer had found time to ask him what had brought him into his bedroom; and though no further allusion had been made to the matter, the tone of the inquiry had been quite enough to prevent a repetition of the offence.

"There is nothing he dislikes so much, you see," he answered. "If I thought it would do the least good, I would go willingly enough; but it would only increase his agitation to have his regular habits upset. And another thing, if this letter is what we fear, and if he is likely to show any emotion, he would rather get that over in seclusion, I am sure."

Lady Mirfield yielded the point, and sent the letters out to Lord Netley's man, who was waiting for them in the hall.

"Mirfield is coasting round Cornwall," she went on by and by. "He has been weather-bound in the Scillies for the last day or two. He asks for all letters to be sent on to the Plymouth post-office. He hopes to be there by to-night."

Garth made some slight observation to show that he was heeding, and she went on at once to the other topic.

"If this news from Leuville should be what we fear, there are bound to be changes here. Mrs. Mirfield could not be left to drift about the world alone. And the boy, too. There is the boy, Abney."

"Yes," said Abney, with quiet comprehension, "there is the boy. That would certainly make a difference."

"All the difference in the world," she returned meaningly. "Lord Netley will forgive Arthur's widow everything, only because she is the mother of his baby son. They are bound to come here, Abney. Lord Netley would

not allow his heir to go wandering about the world with no better guardian than an illiterate woman like his mother. Poor Baby Daisy, her reign is over!"

"I should not meet troubles half-way," Garth said. "A thousand things may happen to prevent Mrs. Arthur Mirfield's residence here. And as for Daisy's reign, that was not likely to be a long one under any circumstances."

Lady Mirfield made no answer at the moment; and without being able to explain to himself why, Garth was yet conscious that his remark had in some vague manner disturbed her.

"I wonder what she is really like?" It was evident that she could not get her thoughts away from that mourning-edged letter and its probable consequences. "I suppose it is no use asking you, Abney? You won't know anything more about her than I do."

"No; I know nothing of her myself," said Abney; "but when George Mirfield was staying with his mother, last Christmas, he told me that he had met Arthur as he came through Paris on his way home, and that he was buying presents for his wife and the little boy. I don't remember much of what George said, but I got an idea somehow that Arthur was quite a devoted husband and father. You know George's reckless style. He said that Arthur seemed to have done uncommonly well for himself in marrying to please his own tastes instead of his father's."

Lady Mirfield flushed slightly, and Garth saw it, and called himself a thick-headed fool.

"Then, at any rate, there must be something lovable about her," she said. "We must take what comfort we can from that."

An hour later, when Garth joined Lord Netley in the study, he found him in his usual place, dressed with as much scrupulous care as ever, but looking, in spite of his perfect toilet and stately calm, as if he had lived through ten years of trouble since he had retired to his room last night.

"I suppose Lady Mirfield showed you the letter I sent down to her?" he began, lifting a long white hand to check Garth as he started to arrange the morning's work on the table before him.

"She told me the news it contained, sir," Garth corrected. "It is a terrible thing."

"It is a very terrible thing, Abney—more terrible for me, perhaps, than any one. It is an awful thing to feel you have a feud with the dead. However, it is past, beyond all recall as far as my son is himself concerned; but I will make what compensation I can to those who are left. Did I hear some allusion to a family—a—a—boy, or is it only my fancy?"

It touched Garth to see his suppressed eagerness on this point. It was his greatest terror that the succession should fall to his reprobate nephew George, who had disgraced himself more irredeemably a thousand times than Arthur had done by his low marriage.

"Yes; there is a boy," he answered at once. "A particularly fine baby, Mrs. Watson said he was, when she met them at Leuville last summer."

"Ah!" There was no disguising the keen satisfaction of the tone. "Well, they must come here, of course, Abney."

"Yes; I thought you would decide to have them here, sir."

"Yes, of course. Understand me, Abney Garth, under any circumstances, no matter how undesirable she may be, I would have made the offer to Arthur's widow—even if she had been childless. Don't think me more selfish than I am. But the boy makes it imperative that they should come here. She—that poor girl won't like it, after the estrangement between my son and me—she will think that, in showing resentment to me now, she is standing up for her dead husband. I know that type so well. It will be a difficult business to persuade her to come. Will you undertake the mission for me, Abney? Will you go to this place and fetch my grandson and his mother home?"

The suggestion startled Abney Garth. It startled him to an extraordinary degree, though why it should was scarcely comprehensible. If he had given a thought to the matter, he would have decided that, barring Mirfield himself, he, Abney Garth, from the very peculiarity of his position in the household—holding the post of confidential friend to each member of the family in turn—was the very

person to be selected for this delicate mission of reconciliation between the austere head of the family and the natural guardian of the heir. But he had not given a thought to it; and the suggestion, coming upon him suddenly, not only surprised him—it displeased him also. And just as his surprise was really groundless, so had he no tangible reason for his displeasure. And yet, there it was—a very pronounced and assertive repugnance for this mission which his employer was proposing to him—a repugnance which would thrust itself into his thoughts, and make itself felt, in defiance of all the common-sense arguments with which he sought to overcome it.

And let the hard-headed dealers in facts, and nothing but facts, hammer away as hard as they like with their arguments that nothing is to be depended upon that cannot be proved by the evidence of one or another of the physical senses. In spite of all their cold-blooded casuistry there remains no more positive fact in life than this fact, that impulses, apparently meaningless in themselves, have often more meaning in the long run than all the full-bodied arguments upon facts put together. The pity of it is that nowadays men and women—and men in particular—are so given to laugh at this gift of instinct.

It was so with Abney Garth now. With all the more delicate part of his perception urging him not to undertake this mission in search of Lord Netley's heir, he yielded, after the faintest pause, to his employer's request, and asked himself, with a touch of self-contempt, what was coming to him that he should be victimized by such womanish forebodings and follies.

The main point once settled, the rest of the interview was devoted to business arrangements.

"The funeral is to-day," said Lord Netley; "so that it is impossible you should be present at that. While you are there you will arrange for a suitable headstone to be erected as soon as possible. But don't waste more time than you can help; I shall be lost without you. By-the-by, if Mirfield is in town, and he can be persuaded to leave his suckling scribblers"—this was one of his lordship's hallucinations, that it was the pursuit of literature which kept his son away from home so constantly—"you

might ask him to go across with you. It would be only civil of him."

"Shall I write you how I get on?"

"No; don't waste time for that. Do what there is to do as quickly as possible, and get back home as soon as you can."

Garth caught the one o'clock train up from York, which would enable him to cross to Calais by that night's boat. But in the midst of his hurry he contrived a few last words with Lady Mirfield.

"They are coming here at once," he told her. "They will most likely be here by the evening of the day after tomorrow, that is, if I can persuade Mrs. Arthur to hurry up her packing. Poor soul! Perhaps a little hurry will be the best thing for her under the circumstances—leave her less time to grieve."

"Say everything that is kind to her for me," she answered. "Tell her I am longing to have her here to comfort her," and then she echoed Lord Netley's entreaty to him not to be longer than he could help. "The place will seem a howling wilderness without you these long hot evenings. Let our need of you hurry your return, Abney."

His heart ached a little as he recalled the words on his journey. If everybody did their duty she would not have felt the need of his presence, he told himself drearily.

On his way through London he sent a wire to Mirfield, to the Plymouth post-office, telling him of his brother's death, and saying when he expected to be back in London with Mrs. Arthur Mirfield, and that a message or letter would reach him on his return at Long's hotel.

He was away from London two whole days. He got back latish on Thursday evening, and found, as he had expected to find, a letter from Mirfield awaiting him.

They had had a rough crossing from Calais, and poor little Mrs. Mirfield was so prostrated by all she had gone through that Garth slipped the letter unopened into his pocket, and attended first of all to his fellow-traveller's comfort.

This matter disposed of, he turned back alone to the coffee-room to read his letter, and was stopped on his way across the hall by hearing somebody inquiring for him of the hall porter.

"My name is Garth," he said, stepping forward; "is it me you are asking for?"

"I suppose it is, sir," answered the inquirer, a messenger with *Great Western Hotel* on the band of his peaked cap. "Do you know anybody of the name of Mirfield? Lord Mirfield, I think it is, only there is such a confusion——"

"Yes, yes; I know Lord Mirfield intimately. Have you a message for me from him?"

"Yes, sir. He's hurt badly, I think, and I've been sent for you. There's been a collision between an express and a heavy coal train, and——"

"Where is he?" interrupted Garth again, looking round instinctively for his hat. "Take me to him."

He paused at the door to leave a message for Mrs. Arthur, in case he might be detained beyond the hour they had arranged for their start in the morning.

"Tell Mrs. Mirfield to await my return here in any case," he said, and ran down the steps and jumped into the waiting hansom.

As he sat quietly there in forced inaction he had time for thought, and in that pause there came to him, with a sudden shock, the knowledge that this catastrophe was what he had been expecting ever since Lord Netley had asked him to go to Leuville in search of Arthur's wife and child. He had felt from the first that the mission was, in some unforeseen way, to be associated with misfortune, and here was indeed a realization of his foreboding. If anything should happen to Mirfield, what a return to Netley his would be! Two sons dead within a week—what a shock for that iron-willed old man at The Fallow!

As the cab dashed up to the door of the *Great Western* the manager came hurrying forward with a grave face.

"You are Mr. Garth?" he said. "Thank Heaven you are come! Lord Mirfield has been asking for you incessantly."

"How is he?" Garth asked. "Be candid, please, and tell me the whole truth. There is Lady Mirfield to be considered. In case of the worst she must be sent for."

"Here comes one of the doctors; he will tell you better than I can. This is Mr. Garth, the gentleman Lord Mirfield has been so anxious to see, doctor."

Garth turned to face the man descending the staircase behind him, and knew the worst at once. The quiet, short gaze of keen inquiry was mutual. The medical man looked him over, and took his measure in a glance.

"I will take you to him," he said. "There is no need to preach self-control to you, I can see. It is only a question of hours with the poor fellow, but it is as well they should be as peaceful as possible."

"You may count on me not to disturb them," Garth answered, and followed him up the stairs, forgetting, in the feeling of the moment, that the telegram had not been sent to Lady Mirfield after all. Afterward he came to regard this oversight as something little short of providential.

Mirfield saw and knew him the moment he entered the room, and put out a clammy hand with feeble eagerness.

"I've been counting the minutes to your coming," he said; "my fear was that you might not have crossed this afternoon, and I have been reckoning on you ever since I knew the truth. I only got your wire about poor Arthur last night; it was that that fetched me up. I thought I might be able to do a good turn for his wife with my father."

"Make yourself content about that, my dear lad," Garth answered gently. "Your father receives her at Netley; she is to make her future home there if she will."

Mirfield smiled with a touch of mournful sarcasm.

"It is the old story," he said; "when it is too late he relents. But the poor little woman will reap the benefit, and I'm glad of that, very glad. I wonder will the old man be as lenient to me when I am gone. And mind you, Abney," he added, with a sudden touch of energy, "I shall need his leniency far more than Arthur did, old man." His glance went wandering round the room to where the two doctors and one of the hotel chambermaids stood whispering apart. "Send them all away," he said. "They can do no good. I have heaps to tell you, Abney, and no time to lose. Even now I don't think I could screw up my courage to make a clean breast of it if I wasn't sure it was all up with me, for, blackguards as we've all been, I've been the biggest blackguard of the lot. The greatest wrong a man can put on an innocent woman I've

put; it was being forced into marrying Charlotte that tied my hands—but for that I'd have righted her. I look to you, old fellow, to see that the wrong doesn't bear more heavily than is possible on her after my death."

Garth pressed the fingers that kept on fluttering near his hands in a pleading way, which was a prayer in itself, and looked back steadily into the strained, pain-stricken eyes fixed so eagerly on his face.

"Your wishes shall be sacred with me," he said quietly. "I will do the utmost that lies in my power to carry them out."

"I knew that," said Mirfield; "we've all of us got into the habit of turning to you in our troubles, and you've never failed us yet, Abney, never once. You're not likely to begin now. I've sent for—her, Abney, but she won't be here in time. You will have to comfort her as best you can after I'm gone. Clear the room, old man, and let me make my confession while I've the breath to do it."

During the next few hours Abney Garth's habitual self-command was put to perhaps the strongest test it had known, but once more training triumphed over impulse. When he at last stood outside his dead friend's door, shaken as he was by all he had heard, he was yet thankful to remember that by no word nor sign of impatience had he disturbed the last moments of the dying man.

But now that the strain was over, now that there was no longer any need for restraint, he began to realize what those hours of forced self-control had cost him.

For a moment or two, as he stood there in the hotel corridor, in the clear light of the summer dawn, hearing without heeding the hushed movements of the women who were already busy inside the room behind him, his limbs grew unsteady under him and his eyesight dim; the world seemed to be falling away from him, leaving him high and dry, an aimless atom floating and drifting helplessly in the world of space.

One of the women, coming out of the room with stealthy footfall, as if she feared to waken the dead man inside, stopped a moment and looked at him pityingly.

"Are you feeling bad, sir?" she asked. "Is there anything I can get you?"

But he did not seem to hear her, or at any rate to understand. He stood there white and rigid, staring blankly into the woman's face; and she, scared as well as pitiful, began to cry a little.

This called him to himself.

"What is the matter?" he asked, rousing himself with a wrench. "Did I frighten you? I'm sorry. I am all right, thank you."

And he went off, unsteadily, down the corridor and prepared a telegram for the Vicar of Cramlingford, asking him to break the sad news to the people at The Fallow.

When the whimpering chambermaid had watched his uncertain progress down the corridor she went back to her companions inside the room, and related the little incident with cautiously lowered voice.

"His friend seems to be taking his death to heart terrible bad," she said, with a glance at the still form on the bed. "I thought he was going to faint, outside there, just now. And he's no relation neither, as far as I could hear."

"No, he's no relation," said another; "but he's been alone with him ever since ten o'clock last night. We was all turned out of the room, and I heard Lord Mirfield say something about a confession. Perhaps he'd got something awful to confess, and that's what upset the other one so much. Who can tell? I dare say, if the truth was known, these swell aristocrats have got as much, and more too, on their minds when it comes to the end as any of the rest of us."

An opinion in which the others concurred with carefully suppressed heartiness, almost as if they thought the dead man might hear and resent the treason against his class.

CHAPTER V.

THE OFF CHANCE.

It was July, and George Mirfield was still in Paris. To the initiated the bare statement means one of two things—a rigid adherence to a singularly unfortunate duty, or an insufficiently filled purse.

As George Mirfield had never allowed an adherence to duty to stand in the way of his inclinations since he had been out of leading-strings, it follows, as a natural consequence, that his extended stay in Paris must have been due to the other and even more unyielding cause, absence of the means to take him elsewhere.

Luck had been all against him lately. At the end of April he had come back from Monte Carlo with his pockets full, but change of air had also produced a change in his run of good fortune. At the Parisian *cercles* luck had gone steadily against him, until, now that the broiling midsummer heat was turning the Paris pavements into a very good imitation of the Inferno, according to the Evangelists, he found himself stranded there without any prospect of getting out.

In these ghastly circumstances there was only one shred of comfort left to him—that there were still some few congenial companions left to share in his misfortune.

There was his downstairs neighbor, Madame Koek-koek, whose duties at The Eden would keep her a prisoner in the broiling, blistering streets until the month was fairly out. Neither was pretty, audacious little Germaine Fauvelle likely to get leave of absence from her proprietors while her last song continued to create a nightly uproar at the especial home of musical art which claimed her services.

But even under such mitigating circumstances as these George Mirfield found Paris anything but a happy hunting-ground during those breathless weeks at the end of July. He would have written to his mother for a small advance—for he was in very truth the profligate his uncle had declared him to be; he had squandered every sou of the comfortable fortune left him by his father, and was now dependent on his mother, who made him a sufficiently good yearly allowance. And it was this fact which kept him from writing to her now. Not three weeks ago she had placed the usual quarterly instalment of a hundred and fifty pounds to his credit at the Lyonnaise, and, hardened reprobate as he was, he yet had some touch of conscience where his mother was concerned. If he applied to her so soon again for money she would guess he was at the cards again, and would begin worrying about him. So he

endured the Parisian heat, and waited for the luck to turn.

And on the last Friday in the month he got what he was waiting for.

Old Barnstaple had netted two plump pigeons—business men who were returning home after a five years' exile in India, and had paused at Paris on their way for a stolen sip at the delights of civilization before passing on to the bosoms of their respectable families.

Major Barnstaple had picked them up at the place where little Fauvelle sang, and had arranged a pleasant little supper expressly to give them the opportunity of meeting that alluring songstress.

"We are to sup at Koek-koek's place," Barnstaple told George, when he met him by chance during his afternoon saunter under the trees in the half-deserted Champs Elysées, "and there is sure to be a little play after supper. You may as well come down from your perch *au cinquième* and take your share of what's going. The Koek is always glad to have you, and the game will be worth the candle. These fellows are like two boys let out from school; they're mad to enjoy themselves, and they aren't dead set on getting their enjoyment cheap."

Which was just as well, George thought to himself grimly, seeing into whose hands they had fallen. Barnstaple's forte was not economy, especially when somebody else was paying the damage.

Certainly economy was not the key-note of the composition to-night, as George discovered in his first glance at the wine labels on the table when he entered Mme. Koek-koek's little *salle-à-manger* and found the party already seated.

Nevertheless, in spite of the liquor being above reproach, George drank cautiously. He knew his own weakness, knew that if he took one step beyond the boundary line of strict temperance the old plunging fever would seize on him again; that, for the sake of the temporary excitement, he would ramp as heedlessly and recklessly as he had done in the maddest of all the mad days of his plenty.

Mme. Koek-koek noticed his cautious coquetting with the sparkling wines, and understood all about it without putting a question.

She leaned across the corner of the table—by and by as often as George Mirfield chose to sit at her table the place on her right was reserved for him—and began to talk to him quietly, under cover of the gay chatter of the others.

“So to-night is to be a night of compensation,” she said, “a night of recompense for some of those others, eh? I heard from our dear Barnstaple of your bad fortune last week. Partly your own fault, he said. Why are you so imprudent, my friend, why so rash?”

The question was very tenderly put. It pleased this bewildering bundle of contradictions, whose erotic intrigues were matters of notorious scandal throughout the length and breadth of theatrical Paris, to adopt toward George Mirfield the attitude of an adoring mother, an attitude which was scarcely justified by the slight difference of age between them. George, however, submitted to her little lectures with the best grace in the world. Her motherly treatment relieved him from the necessity of making love to her, an advantage which he fully appreciated.

“What a question to ask!” he answered her now, smiling carelessly back into her big, soft brown eyes. “Imagine, to ask of a man of my type why he is rash! My soul, you might as well ask of the sun why it shines, or of the grass why it is green—not that it is green just now. I suppose it is because it is my nature to, as the song says—no, by the way, I believe it is a hymn. Is it a hymn or a song, now? I wonder if Barnstaple could tell us?”

But Barnstaple was in the middle of a rather strongly seasoned English anecdote, which the two Anglo-Indians were enjoying with quiet internal chuckles, and which little Fauvelle was trying her hardest to understand, and luckily for herself not making much of a hand at it.

“Leave Barnstaple to his *betises*,” said madame, refusing to be put off by the lightness of his reply. “George, my friend, you speak of men of your type. It is just because you are not of Barnstaple’s type that I grieve my soul for you. This mad play of yours, what reason has it, what motive? Do not tell me that you play expressly to win money, as Barnstaple does. It is not true; you care nothing for the money. It is not that the gambling has so strong a power over you that you cannot keep apart

from it, for you can keep away from it if you choose. I have known you not to touch a card for a month. See you, my friend," she dropped her voice still lower, and laid her hand near him on the table, as if anxious to compel his closer attention, "I have my thoughts sometimes—my thoughts of the more good, the more pure, the more holy, and when I think those thoughts I think of you, and wonder and grieve. In those hours of the most serious I say to myself, 'Is it that he would forget and that he finds it difficult? Is it then, when he cannot forget a past that troubles him, that he turns with a desperation that is almost madness to the tables and the play?' And it seems to me that it must be like that. So many of us have pasts which we would forget if we could—if we could."

George glanced round at the circle of grinning faces. One of the strangers had been trying to explain to Germaine Fauvelle, in his extremely broken French, the point of Barnstaple's disreputable story, and the result had been rich and racy in the extreme.

"Hardly the proper place for sentiment, is it, Mimi?" he asked, smiling still, as he brought his glance back to hers. "Have some more Moselle, and tell me how many *billets-doux* were left for you at the stage door to-night."

"Ah, you make your laugh at me, at the sentiment of a grandmother," she cried softly, lifting her outspread fingers from the table with a gesture of repudiation, "and yet behind your laugh there is a real emotion. Why choke it back, my friend? You would like to persuade me that I am wrong, that you are hard and without soul just as these others are. But I know, I have seen. You have feelings, and a heart, my George. I have seen little things that it would disgust you to have known. Mme. la Concierge told me about the flowers for her little one's coffin, and there are other things. What I say is true, my friend. You are too good to waste your life among this sort of thing——"

"Oh, hang it all!" began George, at the end of his patience; but the look in her eyes checked his vexation before she had well realized it. "Upon my soul, you are a real friend," he muttered under his breath, going back to a language she could understand. "There are not many

women in your place who would bore themselves to give good advice to such a one as I, to such a one as I have always been."

"There are!" she contradicted. "There are many who would, if they had the courage. We love you, George, we all love you, though you do not pay the court to us as some men do—perhaps that is the very reason. My little Fauvelle there, *tête-de-linotte* as she is, wept the other day when she was speaking of you. She thinks she loves you to despair, that foolish one, and yet she would resign herself never to see you again if she could know you were happy among your own people."

"My own people?" echoed George, with a contemptuous laugh; "much of happiness I should get among them! Why, Mimi, there is not one of them but my own mother who would not say 'Thank God!' if they heard of my death."

"Oh, hush, my dear!" she cried, with a quick, genuine pity flashing into her face. "I cannot think such a thing as that. You have offended them a little in some way, and you imagine they cannot forgive you. But have you asked them? Not you! Well, take a word of counsel from an old woman and seek reconciliation with your family. This life here may not be worth very much at the best, but, believe me, there is better value to be got out of it than you are getting now."

"Is there?" he asked, with a return to his old air of reckless indifference. "I don't believe it, Mimi, and if there is, I don't know how to go to work to get it. It is so long since I walked in the paths of propriety that I couldn't find my way back now if I were to try. Or maybe," he added, with the bitterness peeping through his carelessness for a moment again, "maybe I've shut the gate leading to those desirable walks with my own hand, who can say? To the devil with morality, Mimi! What have I done that you should be so severe upon me to-night? My friend, you are too good to me; the pity of it is that I am too bad to take advantage of your goodness. And now, how much longer are we to sit here looking at the remains of the feast? Are the cards in the *salon*, Mimi?"

Mimi clasped her hands tragically.

"The cards!" she cried. "Heaven! I have forgotten. I have not a clean pack left. What are we to do?"

Barnstaple, in the very climax of another scurrilous *on dit*, stopped suddenly and turned round with a scowl which was irresistibly suggestive of a fox interrupted at the very door of the hen-roost.

"No cards!" he said. "What a damnable piece of stupidity!"

"All right, old man," put in George with an easy tranquillity which smoothed away the effect of the other's rough brutality in a breath. "We are not utterly lost, even now. I have a dozen packs unopened in my *appartement* upstairs; they are at your service, madame. Shall I fetch them?"

Madame made some grateful little remark, and he went off after them at once.

He was so long away that Barnstaple began to fume again, in the fear that he was to be done out of his night's plunder after all. But by and by they heard his footstep on the public stairway, coming down from his cheap rented rooms on the fifth floor.

"Here he comes!" said Barnstaple, filling up hastily. "Empty the bottles before we move; the wine is too good to be wasted. What has come to you now, Germaine?" he asked, arrested suddenly in the act of filling her glass by the odd manner in which she was gazing over his head.

Facing round to the door to see what Mlle. Fauvelle's scared stare might mean, he found George standing there with a telegram in his hand and such a queer look on his usually devil-may-care face that he left his seat and went a step or two toward him in expectation of he knew not what.

"What the deuce is up now?" he asked. "Anybody dead?"

"I found this pushed under my door," said George, handing him the paper, and going to the side table he helped himself to a stiff dose of neat brandy, while Barnstaple, after fumbling about with his glasses, held the paper close up under the gas and read the message slowly aloud:

"Both your cousins dead. Should advise your return home. Only one infant's life between you and presumptive heirship. Letter following.—ALICE MIRFIELD."

"Why, man alive!" he cried, when he had fought his way through to the end, "you don't mean to tell us that you are bowled over like that by the loss of a cousin or two! I thought it was a mother at the very least. Why, this is a matter for congratulation! Who's the infant, by the way? Can't you bribe somebody to go over on a secret mission and inoculate it with small-pox or some such pleasant little trifle?"

"I know nothing about the youngster," George answered, coming back to the table, and bringing his brandy with him. "There must have been another little one at The Fallow since I last heard, I suppose. I shall hear all about that to-morrow."

"A new-born infant! Better and better!" exclaimed Barnstaple. "I expect babies are something like puppies before they've had the distemper—the chances are more against than for their coming through all right. It's a very good off chance, George, my boy—a rattling good off chance! Conceive the situation!" he went on in French to the two ladies, who had been watching and listening with close attention. "By the death of two cousins our friend George here suddenly finds himself next in succession—bar one atom of humanity who hasn't got over the danger of its first tooth yet—to an earldom, which is rather better than a French marquisate, and a fortune of about five hundred thousand francs a year. This, mesdames, is what, in sporting English we call a thundering good off chance."

"A thundering good off chance," echoed little Fauvelle in parrot-like repetition. "I know your 'off chance.' I have heard of it before. See you, my friend!" she cried, reaching across Barnstaple to take George's hand, "see you! I, the firstly of all the world, drink to you and your 'off chance.' That baby must die of its very first tooth. I drink to Milord Mirfield of the future."

"I drink that toast too!" cried Barnstaple noisily. "Here's success to The Off Chance, George!"

"Thank you," said George soberly, as they all lifted their glasses and nodded to him. "I have not quite got hold of it yet. It's a bit sudden the news of the two deaths coming at once like this. Isn't it getting late? Drop my family affairs and let us get to the cards."

CHAPTER VI.

ABNEY GARTH BRINGS HOME THE HEIR.

As long as Abney Garth lived the memory of the day succeeding Mirfield's death seemed to him, as often as he looked back at it, a wild phantasmagoria of an over-wearied brain rather than a day that he had in very truth lived through. The activity of his mind during the early hours of the morning was abnormal. This was Friday morning, and he had been on the move with scarcely one unbroken period of rest, ever since his early interview with Lord Netley on Monday. Monday and Wednesday nights had been broken up by the journeys to and from Leuville; all last night he had been up with his dying friend, and yet this morning found his brain working with the feverish rapidity and the clearness of a telegraph machine.

The chaos and perplexity of mind caused by the disclosures he had been listening to cleared away as if by magic, and out of the confusion grew one idea, strong and unshakable.

At all costs his promise to Mirfield must be kept, but—the cost must be his only. The grief and the humiliation of sharing this knowledge which had come to him must be kept from Lady Mirfield, and also from Lord Netley if possible, but above all from Lady Mirfield.

Mirfield's yacht must be got rid of, the crew dispersed, the presiding genius of those pleasant cruises properly provided for elsewhere, and the whole episode closed without a hint of the truth coming to the ears of the dead man's wife or father.

Having come to this resolve, there remained the problem how best to carry it out without arousing the faintest suspicion in the mind of the wronged wife.

And while he was planning and considering how to carry out this matter there were other affairs claiming his careful attention. There were the telegrams from The Fallow to be answered in such a way as to prevent anybody coming up. There must be no attentive eyes and ears about

him just now. There were the formal arrangements for the transporting of the body to Yorkshire to be settled with the railway people. There was Mrs. Arthur Mirfield, a widow of a few days' standing, waiting for him by herself in a large London hotel; and there was yet another lady who, because of his promise to his dead friend, had an equal claim upon his attention and his thoughtful consideration. But this lady, fortunately, could not reach London until the arrival of the train which left Plymouth at nine o'clock.

This gave him an hour or two in which to arrange for her reception, and after he had attended to the other matters in regular order, one after the other, he studied the "Furnished Apartments" column of *The Daily Telegraph* and drove off direct to one of the Bayswater addresses he found there.

Here he engaged the drawing-room floor of a well-furnished house in a quiet street.

"The rooms are for my sister, who has just suffered a very severe domestic affliction," he told the landlady. "She arrives from Plymouth by the three-fifty, and all she will need for the first few days will be absolute quiet and solitude. I will pay the first month in advance if you like, as owing to the hurry I am unable to offer you references."

But the landlady would not hear of such a thing. She was of opinion that she had not let lodgings for fifteen years without knowing a gentleman when she saw one, and a thoroughly respectable gentleman, too, if looks meant anything at all. She had taken in the leading points of Garth's appearance in her first searching "look over," and the clear pallor of his shaven face, the touch of gray at his temples, the firmness of the lips and chin, and the steady directness of his glance had had their due effect upon her.

"Nothing flighty or disreputable about him," was her summing up. "Something in the law, perhaps, or maybe a writer—anyway, something that needed a lot of learning and study. You could tell he was a great man at books by the very cut of his coat."

"And the lady's name, sir?" she said, as Garth passed through the door and stood a moment in the sunshine on the steps; "you've forgotten the name."

"To be sure," he answered, looking up and down the street in search of a cab. "Her name is—Marston. Which is my nearest way to the Bayswater Road? Thank you. Good morning."

"Fool!" he muttered, as he walked off down the street, "to let such a trifle as that nearly trip me up. I ought to have been prepared for the question. Let me make sure that I don't make a *fiasco* of the name business after all." And he took out his note-book and wrote down, "Mrs. Marston, 321 Mitford Grove, Bayswater," and walked along with the open book in his hand, looking at the address as if the sight of a lady's name there was something new to him.

This affair arranged as far as it could be for the present, he took a cab and drove straight to Long's Hotel to prepare Mrs. Arthur Mirfield to resume her journey to Cramlingford that evening. He felt himself that there was something ominous and bodeful in this arrangement. It was a dreadful beginning to a new life for anybody to enter upon it in company with death and mourning, but there was nothing else to be done. This poor, crushed, frightened little soul could not be trusted to make the journey by herself, and it would seem disrespectful to the dead man's memory to leave him to the care of uninterested officials on this last journey of his.

And so it happened that the two heirs—the dead and the quick, the past and the present—returned to Netley Fallow together.

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It was about five o'clock in the morning when Abney Garth reached home with his charges, and the whole household was up and astir to greet them.

Mrs. Boston, The Fallow housekeeper, was at the door when the carriage drew up, prepared to receive the latest additions to the family with all the deference due to their positions; but at the very first sight of the small, brown curly head in Mr. Garth's arms, and the lady, with a pale, pinched face and grief-stricken gray eyes, at his side, the warm-hearted old servant's sympathy quite overcame her usual strong sense of decorum.

She ran down the broad steps and held out her motherly

arms for the sleeping child, and when she had it snug and close she looked across it at the wan little creature in the other corner, and would have liked to put her arms round her too.

"This is a sad home-coming for you, madam," she said pitifully, as they went up the steps side by side in the clear morning sunlight, with the birds singing all round them. She knew all about that look of fright in the poor little thing's eyes, she was saying to herself. It was natural enough that she should be afraid of the meeting with his lordship. Of course she had heard from her husband what sort of a man his father was, and how furious he had been about the marriage with an unknown little "theatrical;" it was understandable enough that she should be terrified at the thought of facing the grim old tyrant. "A terribly sad home-coming," she said again. "His lordship and Lady Mirfield are so overcome by this second blow that I think they hardly remember that you were to arrive this morning, or they would have been here to receive you."

"Likely enough," said Garth, coming up behind them. "Where are they, Mrs. Boston? Not up, I suppose."

"Well, his lordship has not been to bed, sir," she answered. "He has spent the whole night in the study, with Parker in close attendance. Lady Mirfield has not left her rooms since the vicar's visit yesterday."

Garth turned to the pale, trembling little woman, who was looking round the large, sombre entrance hall with an air of shrinking distaste.

"If you can hold out a little longer, I should advise you to wait and see Lord Netley before you go to bed," he said. "It is putting a great strain on you, I'm afraid, but you must remember you are bringing him the only comfort the world holds for him just now. And," he added, "I think it would be good for you, too, to get the meeting over—you will rest better when the ordeal is past."

She lifted her scared, frightened eyes to his, and stood a second or two looking at him. To Mrs. Boston it seemed that she was too terrified to speak; but she noticed how Garth's quiet, steady look appeared to at once restore some little touch of courage to her.

"Remember," he said again, "it is for the child's sake,

You would do nothing to harm the boy in his grandfather's eyes. Lord Netley will certainly want to see him when he knows he is in the house; the little man won't appear to advantage unless you are with him. Give him a chance of making a good impression at the start."

A faint, a very faint, pink flickered for a moment in her white cheeks, and her poor dim eyes kindled a little.

She put out a shaking hand to him.

"I will do whatever you think best," she whispered; "I will not knowingly stand in the boy's light."

"I know you would not," said Garth; "I am sure of that. I will go to Lord Netley at once, and I will come for you as soon as I possibly can. And meantime Mrs. Boston will take you to her own little sanctum—the cosiest corner in the house, Mrs. Arthur—and give you a hot, strong cup of tea, with a new egg beaten in it. Keep up courage; it will not be so bad as you think."

"That is just like Mr. Garth to be so thoughtful," said Mrs. Boston, as she led the way to her room, laboring a little under her unusual burden. "I never knew such a man! He thinks of everything, and I believe he can do everything. To see the way he was nursing this little darling of yours one would have thought he had been used to children all his life. He is a real bonny boy, ma'am. Pray God he may live to be a blessing to you and to us all! How he sleeps! I expect he was awake beyond his usual time last night, and he is making up for it now. The earl is sure to worship him, ma'am; he loves Miss Daisy—Lady Mirfield's little one—but this one, being a boy, will make all the difference in the world."

"I hope he may love him," Mrs. Arthur answered gently, but the reply was so listless, and it was so palpable that she did not want to talk, that Mrs. Boston held her peace, and attended to her wants in silence, until Garth came back to fetch them to Lord Netley.

The old man was very stricken by the double blow that had fallen on him. For the time being all his usual air of command had forsaken him, and he was only a broken-hearted old fellow, who was likely to be exceedingly grateful for any crumb of comfort that fell in his way; and the beautiful boy that this white-faced, timid little woman

was bringing to him was a very substantial crumb of comfort indeed.

And the child, waking up just at the right moment, fresh and happy in his mother's arms, took the reins into his baby hands from the start, and won his grandfather's heart by his fearless impertinence.

"I want to get down, muvver, please," he said, waking up at the noise of the opening door, as Garth ushered them into the study. He was quite wide awake in a moment, very much astonished at finding himself dressed and in his mother's arms instead of in bed, and anxious to investigate his novel surroundings on his own account.

At the sound of the baby command Lord Netley sat suddenly up out of the depths of his big chair and watched the pale little mother set the child down, warm and rosy, out of the shawl he had been wrapped in.

"What's vis place?" said the small creature again, looking round the darkened room with the air of an emperor. "I don't like it, it's dark."

Then his quick eyes caught sight of the white-haired old man watching him from the other side of the room, and he walked straight across to him and put his hands on his knees and looked up placidly into his face.

"Is vis your house, please?" he asked politely. "I don't fink I like it vevy much. Haven't you got no windows?"

His lordship turned to the silent Parker, waiting near his chair.

"Pull the blinds up," he said sharply. "Don't let the child's first idea of his new home be gloomy and forbidding."

The harsh tone of the command caught the boy's attention at once.

"Is you cwoss?" he said, examining his grandfather's face with an air of calm inquiry. "I don't love cwoss people. I'm cwoss sometimes. Muvver don't love me when I'm cwoss. Is you cwoss?"

The old man put his hand over the baby fingers on his knee hesitatingly, almost as if he was afraid the child might resent the caress.

"What's your name?" he asked. "What have they called you?"

"Artie," he answered; "muvver's son, Artie. Is you cwooss?"

It was evident he could not leave the subject until his mind had been set at rest on it.

"No, I'm not cross," his lordship assured the small questioner with impressive gravity. "I am never going to be cross with Artie, never at all. Then Artie will love me, and stay with me always."

"And muvver too!" cried Artie, taking his grandfather up quick and short on the word. "And muvver too, always."

The suggestion seemed to recall his new daughter-in-law's presence to Lord Netley's memory; he looked across the room at her. She was sitting just inside the door, where Garth had drawn up a chair for her, her whole attitude suggestive of utter prostration.

"And mother too," repeated the old man, with a touch of unusual diffidence in his manner, which showed how thoroughly his old habit of authority had been shaken out of him. "That is, if mother will," and he struggled up out of his chair, with the baby's hand in his, and made a step or two toward the door.

"This young man has made me forgetful," he said. "It was good of you to bring him to me. I begin to think that perhaps your goodness is more than I deserve. I have been harsh and unforgiving in the past; will you be more generous and forget my shortcomings? Let the boy make peace between us, my dear."

Mrs. Mirfield still sat motionless for a moment, with her eyes bent on the carpet and her small hands fluttering in and out and about one another in a very agony of speechless agitation, and then she lifted her eyes and looked at the old man and the bonny boy, hand in hand, in the middle of the room, and with a low, sorrowful little cry she darted across to them and dropped at Lord Netley's feet in a passion of emotion.

"You are too good to me!" she gasped, her words fighting with her overmastering sobs. "Don't talk to me of forgiveness—it is I who need it from you! I am wicked past all pardon; but for the sake of my boy you must let me—let me—stay. I could not part with him—now I am

so alone—it would kill me—kill me—I should die, and my death would be at your door! You must—you must let me stay.”

“Muvver, muvver!” cried Artie, with his two short arms clasped round her down-bent head, “muvver, ducky, don’t cwy! I’ll stay wif you, muvver, if you won’t cwy.”

Lord Netley shrank back helplessly from the sobbing creature, with a glance of very palpable distaste at Garth, who hurried forward and lifted her on to her feet again and led her to a couch, and sent Parker out of the room for water.

“You must make allowances, sir,” he said quietly. “Mrs. Mirfield has gone through a very great deal lately, enough to shatter any one’s self-control. She has not had a night’s rest this fortnight past; she will be calmer when she has once had a sound sleep. Arthur would have nobody near him at the last but his wife, and it has been a great strain on her.”

Lord Netley’s face softened. He came to the couch—Artie had already scrambled up, and was trying to get his mother’s hands away from her face—and sat down by the side of the overwrought little woman.

“My trouble has made me selfish,” he said, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder. “In my own grief I was forgetting yours. My dear, we will comfort each other, and when that fails, this grandson of mine shall comfort us both. You shall be another daughter to me, Molly, my child, and, for the years that are left to me, I will do what I can to lessen your sense of loss.”

“You are too good to me,” she murmured, sobbing still, but much more quietly, “too good. I will try to deserve your kindness, but I never shall—never!”

“Just a lot of play-acting airs, and nothing more,” said Parker, when he met Daisy’s nurse, on his way back to the study with the water for Mrs. Arthur.

There was a very general prejudice against this play-actress person and her boy among the servants, and nobody felt this more strongly than Lessman, who, on the arrival of the new little heir, foresaw the dethronement of her own darling, and whatever Lessman felt on any subject her elderly admirer, Parker, felt also.

"I should like to know," said that estimable man, resuming his lofty and majestic criticism on the scene he had just witnessed, "I should just like to know when you would catch a lady, a real bred one, making such an exhibition of herself as that? Flinging herself down on the floor, and grovelling at his lordship's feet, and howling and sobbing, and crying out that she was too wicked to live, and the Lord knows what. 'Pon my soul, Miss Lessman, I expected to see her back hair come tumbling down, like it always does in the harrowing scenes in the plays, and I began to wonder when they were going to turn the lime light on."

"But you don't mean to say," muttered Lessman, evidently very much impressed by what she had heard, "you don't mean to say she really went on like that? Whatever could she mean by being too wicked to live? How did his lordship take it, Mr. Parker?"

"Looked disgusted, as well he might."

"And how did it finish?"

"Oh, I didn't see the finish. That officious young pedagogue Garth took it on himself to send me out of the room for some water for her hysterical ladyship, and I suppose it's about time I appeared with it. *Oh ray war!*"

Lessman nodded a reply to this elegant farewell and went off quietly to her breakfast. But although she said nothing, her head was full of Parker's story, and in especial her thoughts busied themselves with his exaggerated reproduction of Mrs. Arthur's confession of wickedness.

"Too wicked to live!" said Lessman to herself. "What on earth could she have meant by telling his lordship such a thing as that?"

When the interview with Lord Netley was over, and Mrs. Arthur Mirfield and her boy had been taken to the rooms prepared for them and left in charge of one of the maids, to whose pleasant face Artie had taken a fancy, when at last there seemed to be nothing left for Abney Garth to do for a few hours, he still made no attempt to gain a little of the rest he so much needed.

It was Lady Mirfield who was in his thoughts most just now. She would want to hear all the particulars of her husband's last hours as soon as she could bear to see any-

body, and Garth kept himself in readiness for her summons, throwing himself ready dressed on the couch in his room, and snatching every now and then a few minutes of dream-laden sleep, which did him more harm than good.

The summons he was waiting for did not come until midday was already past, and Mrs. Arthur and her boy were already out on the "ladies' lawn" at the side of the house. Garth heard the child's voice through one of the open corridor windows, as he made his way to Lady Mirfield's apartments.

She was sitting in a low chair when he entered the room, with her glance on her flaxen-haired little daughter at her feet. She was very white, with a whiteness like marble, so cold and hard, and the movement of her hand, as she put it out in greeting, was like the movement of an automaton, mechanical and lifeless.

He took the hand and sat down near her, and waited for her to speak. He felt dimly that there was danger in this unnatural calm, felt that he should need all his caution, and her first words proved the keenness of his judgment.

After what seemed to him, in the overstrained state of his nerves, an eternity of silence, she flashed round on him with a swiftness which told something of the intensity of the feelings behind her immovable bearing.

"Abney," she said, with her eyes full on his, "why was I not sent for?"

"Sent for?" he echoed, as if he hardly understood the question. "Sent for, Lady Mirfield!"

"Yes, why was I not sent for before the—the end?"

"There was no time," he answered. The momentary surprise was over and he was on his guard again. "The end came so quickly."

"It is your pity that keeps you from telling me the truth," she said harshly, still looking at him as if she would force from him all he knew, and in spite of all his strength of will his glance fell away from hers as she made her accusation. "But I know how it was. He—my husband—did not want me. His thoughts never turned toward me in his last moments."

Garth leaned toward her and took one of her cold hands in his.

"Dear Lady Mirfield, I assure you I did not reach his bedside until——"

"Yes, I know all that," she cried, putting a hand to her throat, as if to press back the unconquerable pain that rose from her heart. "I know about that. But why was I not sent for—before? The moment the accident occurred? The moment the injured people reached Paddington?"

"You know he was unconscious for some hours," Garth suggested gently.

"Still," she said again, with such a thrill of suffering in her voice that Garth could hardly keep still—"still, if he had wanted me at all there would have been some attempt made to send for me. Abney," she cried passionately, "why was it that my husband never loved me? Why was it that, with all my efforts to win his affection, I never got nearer his heart? What was it that kept him apart from me? Oh, the misery to think of it now!"

She got up and began pacing the room, and Garth sat still, trying not to feel bitterly toward the dead, and finding it one of the hardest tasks he had ever set himself.

She stopped in front of him presently, to put another of her self-torturing questions, and was struck by the change in him.

"You are worn out," she said. "Have you had any rest yet?"

"Not yet."

"And I am keeping you here——"

"Not at all. I could not rest, under any circumstances, just yet. My nerves must steady down a little first."

"It is awful for us all," she muttered, resuming her fitful pacing of the room; "but surely it is worse for me than any one. I look back at my life with him and find no comfort anywhere. If I could only persuade myself that I had helped to make his short life happy! If I could remember only one day—just one, out of all his life—when he had seemed to find rest—absolute rest and peace—in my society! But I can't—not one, Abney!"

"It is a houseful of sorrow," said Abney quietly, stooping to touch Daisy's bright hair, and so getting his miserable eyes away from that hard, white face for a moment. If he could but have found a shred of comfort to offer her.

"Think of it, Lady Mirfield! A childless father, two widows, and two fatherless babes, in one short week. How little we thought on Monday, when you brought me that letter with the French postmarks——"

"Two widows?" She stopped her walk in front of him again. "Two widows? Is she here, Abney—poor Arthur's wife?"

"Yes; and her boy."

"Her boy—Arthur's boy," she said slowly.

"She is crushed with her grief, too——" he began, but she broke vehemently across his words.

"Her grief—hers? But he loved her! Think how it must warm her heart to remember that she made him happy. But—I—I——" She stopped, with a sudden catch in her breath, and began again abruptly, "Ought I to see her, Abney?"

"You ought to do just what will be most in keeping with your own wishes. She, Mrs. Arthur, is very quiet and unassuming; she does not expect anything in the way of ceremonious receptions."

"Poor little soul! Quite alone in a houseful of strangers. Not a creature that she can open her heart to, and her grief nearly as new as mine! Abney," she turned to him with some faint sign of softening in her mask-like face, "would she—do you think she would come to me here?"

He rose at once, relieved beyond measure by the request, and went to where Mrs. Arthur was sitting under the big beech on the ladies' lawn, watching her boy at play with his new friend.

"It will be worse than the other," she said, when she knew what he had come for. "A thousand times worse. If you could only understand! You will not go away and leave us, not just this first time? Afterward, I shall have grown more used to facing her. Just now I can only think of the wrong I am doing her in coming here with my boy and ousting her from the first place. You will not leave us."

In the midst of her own cold, homeless grief, and notwithstanding her very real sympathy with Arthur Mirfield's widow, Lady Mirfield had, unknown to herself, some

touch of the ancient prejudice against her husband's sister-in-law still lingering in her mind. She had, unconsciously, painted in her imagination a fancy portrait of this young woman with tenth-rate theatrical antecedents—a portrait in which yellow hair and very red lips were the most prominent particulars. "This picture was so vividly in her mind that, when Abney Garth opened the door and made way for a slender little woman, pale and pretty, with soft, plenteous nut-brown hair and clear blue-gray eyes, raised just now in a timid, pleading way that had some touch of fear mixed with its entreaty, when she saw this contrast to the crude portrait of her imagination, Lady Mirfield stood a moment in incredulous surprise. She had not known how strong her distaste had been for that fancy picture of hers until she measured it by her relief at finding how it differed from the reality.

It was an impulse of protection, even more than of liking, that urged her forward, after that surprised pause, and made her put her arms round the slight figure and pull the tender, pleading face down to her shoulder.

"Oh, Molly," she cried, so touched by the sorrow in the small face that she took no thought for the fact that they were strangers, "oh, Molly, poor little patient Molly! If I could only be patient too! But I can't! There is too much remorse mixed up with my sorrow."

"And is there none in mine?" cried Molly in a half-strangled voice. "Is it nothing to have stood between my husband and those who loved him?"

"But he loved you, Molly. You will always know that you more than made up to him for all he lost. That is the sharpest pang in my grief, Molly, that I was a burden instead of a blessing to my husband."

Molly moaned in the other woman's arms—such a strange sound it was, like the cry of one who has resolved to suffer and endure all in silence, but whose resolution fails her at the critical moment, when the anguish reaches its cruelest climax.

Garth moved uneasily at his post by the window, as if that smothered cry was too much for him, but he did not interfere, his help was not needed. Mrs. Arthur had lifted

her face and was speaking quietly, with the tears following one another down her wan cheeks.

"Tell me all, poor dear," she said, "tell me everything. Let me feel every pang, every sorrow you have felt. Let me gain the only comfort left me by knowing that I am some poor little comfort to you. Ease your aching heart by sharing the burden of the pain with me."

"If I could—if I could!" cried Charlotte, as if she were wrestling single-handed with an antagonist stronger than herself.

And then, all in an instant, the pleading, yearning sympathy of the small, pale face, so close to her own, bore down the rigid barriers of her grief; she dropped her face in her hands, and Garth heard her sobs from where he stood.

"Would you go now?" said Molly to him, as she led the weeping woman to a chair and knelt down by her. "I am not afraid any longer, Mr. Garth. God has set me this task, and He will give me the strength to carry it out."

And Garth went, wondering at the new light in her sorrowful eyes, the sudden strength of purpose gathering round her mobile lips.

"She is just one of those women," he told himself, "who scarcely ever trouble to make up their minds so long as there are others to do it for them, who remain unconscious of their own strength of will until some object presents itself which they think worth fighting for, and then, behold! This instinct of maternity, what a wonderful thing it is! How marvellous the influence must be which can bring strength out of weakness, and make the timid bold to the death. Poor little mother! It is a task she has undertaken! Will she ever carry it through, I wonder? At any rate she has nailed her colors to the mast, and she will fight her ship as long as two planks hold together under her."

CHAPTER VII.

“SHE’S NOT EVERYTHING SHE SHOULD BE.”

THE first overwhelming rush of grief was over at Netley Fallow, and the household was by degrees drifting back into some semblance of its usual routine. The gong went at meal times, and the two ladies and Abney Garth began to take their food in each other’s society, instead of having trays sent up to their respective apartments, as had been the rule lately.

Lord Netley was the only person who showed no inclination to resume his usual habits. He still had all his meals brought to him in his study, and kept entirely away from the family circle. As the days went by the people in the house began to understand that the trial he had gone through had been too terrible for a man of his years, that the shock of his two sons’ deaths was likely to have a permanent effect upon him.

These last ten days had aged him as much as as many years of ordinary wear and tear would have done. At sixty he was already a feeble old man, with a reluctance for exercise of every kind, a reluctance even to move from his study chair more than the regulation number of times a day; and if his intellect was still as clear as ever, it was hardly as vigorous as it had been. His headwork was as sound, perhaps, but less spontaneous. His brain had lost the trick of thinking well and quickly at the same time—lost its gift of intuitive perception. And in the trouble of this sudden failure—for Garth was almost sure he was conscious of the change in himself—the only consolation he found was in the society of the new little Lord Mirfield and his mother.

It was astonishing, so the servants said among themselves, to see how that theatrical person was worming her way into everybody’s good graces. Indeed, by the end of the first fortnight at The Fallow, things had gone so far in the very servants’ hall itself—the last stronghold of prejudice and intolerance—that one or two of the bolder

spirits had openly declared their opinion that a woman is not of necessity a lost creature because she has been on the stage, and they had even gone further and declared that if Mrs. Arthur had been an actress a dozen times over that would not alter the fact that she had the sweetest voice and the winningest smile in Yorkshire.

To this rank heresy Lessman made no answer, but she begrudged Mrs. Arthur her growing popularity in the servants' hall, just as she begrudged Artie the first place in his grandfather's affections, and, in her loyalty to what she magnificently styled "the aristocratic side of the house," she would have delighted in anything that brought discredit on the little heir or his mother. It was an unamiable but an almost inevitable feeling, under all the circumstances. Baby Daisy was deposed, and not being old enough to resent the deposition herself, her faithful nurse resented it for her.

Perhaps, among all the people who were affected by Mrs. Arthur Mirfield's appearance with her boy at Netley Fallow, there was only one who felt it more deeply than poor, shallow-pated Lessman, and this person had certainly more justification for her resentment.

Mrs. George Mirfield had almost a right to detest Mrs. Arthur and her handsome little boy. This babe of two years was the only obstacle left between her son George—that reprobate who was living on his wits on the Continent—and the direct succession to the family title and estates. The mother who, in such a case as this, did not hate the only remaining obstacle would have been something more than human. And, in addition to the crime of standing between her son and his inheritance, Mrs. Mirfield had another cause of complaint against these people, in their utterly plebeian birth. It might be a simple matter enough for the earl and Charlotte to overlook Mrs. Arthur's deplorable past, but Mrs. Mirfield had an uneasy suspicion that if she followed suit, and adopted this little daughter of the people without a protest, people would suggest that it was because she had a touch of fellow-feeling for her. The daughter of the army meat contractor was forever tormenting herself with these memories of her own vulgar ancestry. In this instance it produced a touch

of condescension in her manner toward Mrs. Arthur which that observant young woman found peculiarly irritating. From any other member of the family she would have taken it meekly enough, but from this would-be lady, with her fine airs and pretentious manners, it was a little more than she could always put up with.

And so there was a feud between the two mothers from the first, and Lessman was not slow to find out that Mrs. Mirfield was with her in her antagonism toward the newcomers.

But the elder lady did not get much opportunity for venting her spleen while Abney Garth was present, for the secretary had openly adopted the position of Mrs. Arthur's friend and champion, and was always ready to side with her upon any and every occasion.

Ever since the day of Mirfield's death Garth had known that affairs were only patched up for a time; that there was no safety for anybody as things stood now, and that it would be necessary for him to have an interview with "Mrs. Marston" at 321 Mitford Grove, Bayswater, before any definite settlement was arrived at.

There was scarcely an instant in the day that this feeling of insecurity was not in his mind, and at the very earliest moment that he could suggest it he took a day's leave, "for business of his own in London."

When he went to say "good-by" to Mrs. Arthur he found her in the children's day nursery, from which the night nurseries opened off on either side, at work by a table near the window, cutting out some small garment for Artie, the making of whose clothes was her one recreation just now.

Garth's first action on coming into the room was rather significant. He glanced at the doors on either side of the room, and seeing the one leading to Daisy's sleeping apartment open, he crossed over and closed it.

"It is arranged that I go to town to-day," he said, coming to the other side of her cutting-table, and going straight to what he had to say in a thoroughly business-like manner. "I get away from here about three and catch the three fifty-five up from York."

"And when do you get back?"

It was evident that she had heard of this visit to London before, and equally evident that she was resigned to it as an unavoidable evil.

“To-morrow, I hope.”

“Say to-morrow without fail, Abney.” She had already slipped into the habit of calling him by his first name, as the rest of the family did. “You don’t know how I dread being left alone—even for one day.”

“Yes, I do,” he answered promptly; “that is why I have put it off so long, to give you time to grow a little more sure of yourself. Bar unforeseen accidents, I promise you I will be back to-morrow. Not that I think there is any fear of a catastrophe now.”

“There is always a fear with me,” she said, folding her small hands on the table in front of her and looking away through the open window with an air of sorrowful patience, “and I begin to think there always will be. It is changing my whole nature, Abney. I don’t know myself. I don’t think I shall ever get my old high spirits back again.”

“Oh, but you will though,” he answered cheerily. “It is early days yet to talk about high spirits; they will come in time. Why, I heard you making Lord Netley laugh last night.”

But she was too busy with her own thoughts to heed his kindly meant words.

“I don’t think I should be so cowardly if it were not for Mrs. Mirfield,” she went on. “I am always afraid of her suspecting something, and always fancying she does suspect; it is the usual guilty conscience, I suppose. She hates me, Abney, and she would revel in my downfall. If she were once to have her suspicions aroused, if she once got hold of the fact that Artie has no legal right to the position he fills here, she would never rest till she had wormed out the whole unhappy truth.”

“But she never will get hold of that fact,” he answered her decisively, “so why worry about it? And, do you know, I would not encourage such faint-hearted notions by talking about them if I were you. It is foolish on all accounts—foolish, because it keeps your anxiety alive, and foolish, because one should never talk about secrets more

than is absolutely necessary; there is always a certain amount of danger in it."

If for once Abney Garth could have accomplished the feat of being in two places at one time—if, while he was being whirled along on his way to that critical interview with "Mrs. Marston," in a stifflingly hot railway carriage on the Great Northern Railway, he could also have been present at a conversation which was taking place in the cool shade of the avenue at Netley Fallow, he would have received irrefragable proof of the truth of that last remark of his.

Mrs. George Mirfield, whose house adjoined the chief entrance gates of The Fallow, had seen Lessman and the two children, from her bedroom window, running about in the shadow of the big trees; and one of Mrs. George Mirfield's greatest weaknesses was a liking for a quiet little talk with a confidential servant, when there was no chance of interruption. Consequently it followed that, five minutes from the time she first sighted them, Mrs. George Mirfield was also sauntering in the shadow of the big trees, and in two more minutes she was listening to Lessman's account of her grievance in being sent out alone with both the children when she "was only engaged for one."

Mrs. Mirfield bore the infliction with patience which would have been incomprehensible had she not had a purpose of her own to serve by it. But she was only waiting her turn.

"I saw Mr. Garth drive by this morning," she began presently, when Lessman's fit of grumbling had somewhat exhausted itself. "I noticed he was driving the big gray horse that they use for long journeys. Was he going far?"

"He was going to York to catch the London train, ma'am."

"London? Is he going to London?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"For long?"

"Oh, no; I heard him say he should be back to-morrow without fail."

"Ah! I thought the earl would not get along without him for more than a day or two."

It was one of Mrs. George Mirfield’s little peculiarities to always speak of her brother-in-law as “the Earl.”

“Well,” said the girl, with the reticent air of a person who could say a lot but is withheld by a sense of delicacy, “well, I don’t think, somehow, as it is his lordship as is bringing Mr. Garth back in such a hurry this time, Mrs. Mirfield.”

Mrs. Mirfield turned sharp round and looked the nurse in the face.

“Who then?” she asked shortly.

But Lessman was not prepared to plump down her information in reply to such a “stand and deliver” style of request as this. Mrs. Mirfield saw her mistake at once and made haste to rectify it.

“Mr. Garth is a very lucky young man to be in such request,” she said. “He seems to be quite the most important person in the house just now. The earl should keep him more in his place. The next thing will be a love affair between him and one of those two young widows, and a nice scandal that would be. I’ve had the idea in my head for the last day or two that he was getting rather too attentive to Mrs. Arthur. That is the worst of these actress people; they are always so eager for admiration.”

This kind of bait was more to Lessman’s liking; she rose to it at once.

“Well, they do seem very great friends, that’s certain,” she answered. “We’ve all noticed it, down in the hall. But I’ve got a fancy that it ain’t love that draws ’em together, nor yet simple friendship. I think——” She lowered her voice to a whisper of breathless enjoyment—“I’m almost sure there’s something of a deal more consequence between them than anything of that sort, Mrs. Mirfield.”

Mrs. Mirfield was clever enough to hold her tongue; one wrong word and the coming confidence might be checked. She nodded her head, as if this was just what she had suspected all along, and fixed her big black eyes expectantly on Lessman’s mystery-laden face.

“They were talking about some secret this morning, him and her. He’d come up to the nursery to say ‘good-by’ to her, and I was at Miss Daisy’s window, and—I heard—something.”

"About me?"

"Well, it was and it wasn't. It was more about herself than you; and though I didn't get hold of her exact meaning, I knew it was something against her."

"Against her? How do you mean?"

"Against her or against the child, it's all one. She said something about him not having a legal right—I know those were the words she used, a legal right—and if Mrs. Mirfield once got to know of it,' she says, 'she'd never rest till she'd got at the truth.' "

"Good God, Lessman, do you know what you are saying?"

Mrs. Mirfield had pulled up abruptly and put her hand against the trunk of the tree at her side. She was quite pale, and looked altogether overcome by the shock of what she had heard.

"Oh, yes, I know what I'm saying well enough," answered Lessman. "If I hadn't I shouldn't have repeated it to you."

"No, no, of course not," said the startled woman, warmed into conciliation by the girl's air of ruffled dignity. "But, you know, this is something dreadful. I—I—can't realize it! To think that she was not Arthur Mirfield's lawful wife after all. You're quite, quite sure you have not made a mistake about the words?"

"Quite sure, Mrs. Mirfield. 'Artie hasn't any legal rights,' was the words she used. I'd swear it in a court of justice."

"And to think she should have dared to come here and palm herself off on the earl in this shameless fashion! I can't get over it. I think I'll come on up to the house with you now and see what she's got to say for herself, without Mr. Garth at her elbow to prompt her."

"Yes, do!" cried Lessman, eager for the discomfiture of the person whom she regarded as Baby Daisy's natural enemy; "yes, do, Mrs. Mirfield. It's my opinion she won't have a word to say for herself without him to back her up. You won't bring my name into it, though, will you? Lady Mirfield is such thick friends with her she'd give me my notice if she knew I'd been saying anything against her. They're quite like real sisters, them two. Lady Mirfield

was telling her all about her very own sister’s death the other day, and she asked her to call her Lotte, like Mrs. Rees used to do. It’s unaccountable to me how they can all be so free with her. Parker says that the place where she used to act in London is the kind of place where respectable people would never think of going; he says that was what made his lordship so mad. If it had been one of the fine West End theatres he would have looked over it more easy.”

“Very likely,” Mrs. Mirfield answered, but it was evident that this branch of the subject had lost some of its old interest for her.

This last suggestion had put all the smaller charges against Mrs. Arthur Mirfield out of her mind for the time being. What if this thing should be true? Well, then, George would step straight into the succession at the earl’s death. The thought set her heart leaping with hope. She hurried her steps involuntarily, she was all impatience to find herself in the presence of this young person, that she might put this information to the test by one or two searching questions.

But if she expected to find Mrs. Arthur an easy subject to pump, she was mistaken.

The fact was that nobody at Netley Fallow knew Mrs. Arthur yet as she really was. Since her arrival in Yorkshire circumstances had been so heavy upon her that she had been glad to shelter herself behind any refuge that offered. And yet cowardice was no part of her nature. When the need for fighting her own battles arose there was plenty of the true spirit of battle in her.

“The ladies were having tea on the ladies’ lawn,” Mrs. George Mirfield was told when she reached the house. “Would she wait in the drawing-room, or would she go straight out to them?”

She would go straight out to them.

She saw them through the long, open windows, two sombre figures, in their heavy crape gowns, reclining in the unbroken shadow of the big beech tree.

Mrs. Arthur had her face toward the house, and saw the visitor the moment she emerged from the windows. Mrs. Arthur’s eyes, like most of that blue-gray color, were good

ones for seeing with, and before the other lady was half-way across the lawn those long-sighted eyes had seen enough to put their owner on her guard and brace herself up, with a little quiver of desperation, for whatever might be in store for her, though it is probable she did not expect the attack to take the form it did.

"The tea has only just come out," Lady Mirfield said. "Are you thirsty? No need to ask, though; this weather produces a chronic thirst, I think. Mrs. Arthur will give you some tea. Molly, my dear, have you a spare cup there?"

"I don't think I will have any tea, thank you, Charlotte, it makes one so warm." She had her company manners on now, speaking slowly and languidly, and in a forced, artificial voice, which grew very wearisome to the listener after the first few minutes. "I happened to meet Lessman with the children in the avenue, and sauntered along with them until I found myself at the house without knowing it."

It was another of Mrs. George Mirfield's little ways to continually describe her most commonplace actions as the result of accidents, for all the world as if she considered it "bad form" to do anything with a definite purpose.

"You must have found it very warm walking, I should think," Charlotte said lazily, and Mrs. Mirfield, fancying more than was meant in the words, went into an elaborate explanation of how she had been tempted by a glimpse of the cool shadow under the avenue, caught accidentally from her bedroom window.

After this she wandered off, by a very circuitous route, to tell them what she had been doing at her bedroom window at that time of day, and arrived at last at the statement—manufactured for the occasion—that she had been turning over an old collection of papers which she had not looked at for more than a year. And then, feeling sure that she had given the whole thing an appearance of perfect naturalness, she had arrived at the end she had been aiming at.

"And, among other things," she said, turning her big, prominent eyes on Molly, "I came across the old copy of the *Morning Post* with the announcement of your marriage in it, Mrs. Arthur."

"Yes?" said Molly, getting up to move her cane chair

beyond the reach of an intrusive sunbeam which had found its way through the thick foliage of the beech.

She did not reseal herself at once; there was something wrong with the position of the head cushion of the back of the chair, and she stood with her face turned from the other ladies while she untied and retied it.

It seemed to be rather an intricate operation, judging by the time it took, and Mrs. Mirfield would have given a great deal to have got up and watched Molly’s face during its performance, but this was more than her courage was equal to. So she waited, with resolute patience, until the cushion was at last arranged and Molly was seated again, calmly looking up into the green depths above her head, and then she resumed her subject.

“I remember how very much everybody was amused at the time over that announcement,” she said; “we almost wondered that the paper accepted it.”

Molly made no sign. The pretty lips, which could look so smilingly audacious, were shut closely, and the blue-gray eyes went on with their quiet investigations among the foliage. It was Charlotte who took up the conversation, fighting Molly’s battle because she thought Molly was too proud to fight it for herself.

“Why was everybody so amused?” she asked. “What made it so funny?”

“Why, the utter absence of *savoir faire* it betrayed, my dear Charlotte. No clergyman’s name mentioned, not even the name of the church where the ceremony took place. I remember dear Lady Burton laughing about it, and saying that it was evident Miss Molly de Courcy—we always thought your *nom de théâtre* so exquisitely droll, Mrs. Arthur, the homely ‘Molly’ and the magnificent ‘de Courcy’ go so oddly together. ‘It is quite evident,’ said dear Lady Burton, ‘that Miss Molly de Courcy drew up the advertisement herself. Arthur Mirfield would have known better. He would have given us the chance of satisfying ourselves by a look at the church register if we had so wished.’ Such a shrewd woman of the world—Lady Burton—sees so much further than most people.”

“A thoroughly vulgar-minded woman I call her!” Charlotte answered rather warmly. She had a strong desire

to shake Mrs. Mirfield till her teeth rattled. All the stronger the desire was because the ill-natured sneer at Molly was made with an air of frank amusement which precluded open retaliation. "Such an idea would never have occurred to any decent-minded person."

"I don't know about that, my dear Charlotte." The prominent eyes were on Molly's upturned face again with an eager, hankering look in them which was in direct contrast with the languid slowness of her speech. "At any rate the idea did certainly occur to me. Mystery in such matters is always a mistake. I'm sure you see that for yourself now, Mrs. Arthur."

"No," said Molly, with a gay little laugh of indifference, "I don't see it even yet, Mrs. Mirfield. But, then, in these matters of *savoir faire*"—the mimicry of Mrs. Mirfield's exaggerated accent was daringly unmistakable—"in these matter of *savoir faire*—do I pronounce the French properly?—a Molly de Courcy could not be expected to have the dainty discrimination of an Alice Borthwicke, could she now? Do you wonder how I know your maiden name was Borthwicke? I was reading to Lord Netley yesterday the parliamentary reports. It seems there has been a fuss about the quality of the meat supplied to the soldiers, and one of the members asked if it were true that one man supplied such bad meat to the army that he went by the name of Putrid Borthwicke. I wondered what made Lord Netley laugh so much about it, and he told me that the gentleman with the unpleasant—*nom de guerre* we will call it, as you are so fond of French phrases—was your father."

Mrs. Mirfield sat perfectly still, with her round black eyes fixed in a stony stare on the pale, smiling little face opposite her, and her naturally swart cheek showing a vivid scarlet under their generous dose of pearl powder.

Lady Mirfield leaned her fair head restfully back in her chair. She no longer felt the least desire to shake Mrs. Mirfield, but she would have liked to give Molly a quiet kiss of approval.

That young woman went smoothly on with what she had to say.

"Lord Netley seemed to think it almost as funny as you thought my absence of *savoir faire*"—again the reproduc-

tion of the other’s labored French—“but very likely you won’t see it in the same light. I don’t think it is often easy to join in the laugh against one’s self, do you?”

It was impossible that Mrs. Mirfield should answer the smiling inquiry with befitting dignity, so she held her tongue, and Charlotte put in her little contribution.

“It depends so much on the manner of the laugh, Molly, my child. A spiteful laugh is certainly rather trying to the temper, but a little gentle chaff is quite another thing.”

“You are a wonderful person, Lotte,” said Molly, bringing her eyes down at last to flash a warm look across at the speaker. “You have a positive gift for getting at the essence of a thing. Nobody minds well-meant chaff, of course.”

There was a short pause, broken by Mrs. Mirfield. She would crush this little plebeian at all costs. Holding such a weapon as she held, was it likely that she would restrain her hand?

“To return to the original point,” she said, sitting up, flushed and rigid, on her chair, and putting her question with the strength and force of a sledge-hammer. “Why was it that you did not mention the name of the church you were married at in the advertisement, and have you any objection to telling me it now?”

“Personally, not the faintest.” In spite of their paleness—and they were pale, she knew it herself—her lips still smiled bravely. “Personally, I should be delighted to gratify your very natural curiosity, but there is my duty to Lord Netley to be considered. He told me he wished my past dropped, utterly and entirely, from the moment I entered his house, and after his great goodness to me I am not likely to displease him intentionally. If you have any really good reason for wanting to know where I was married I should advise you to ask Lord Netley himself.”

“I will take your advice,” said the angry woman, still making a show of keeping up appearances. “I certainly have a very good reason for what you term my natural curiosity. I think I will go and put my question to the earl at once, if he is visible. I dare say I shall see you again before I go, so I won’t say good-by.”

Charlotte watched her across the lawn with a half-amused air.

"You must not be too hard on her, Molly," she said indulgently; "remember what a trial it must be to her to see you and Artie in the place where her son would otherwise be."

But Molly's little flash of spirit was over and done with; she had not even enough courage left to make a congenial reply. She rose slowly, as if she was tired, and went over to Charlotte and gave her a kiss. It was the first time she had done such a thing, for, with an innate perception of their relative positions, she had always left Lady Mirfield to make the advance in such matters.

"I'm going in to rest a little," she said, with a touch of weariness in her manner. "The sun has given me a headache, or perhaps it was Mrs. Mirfield. How she hates me! Lotte, I wish you'd make me a promise."

"Not in the dark, Molly; let me hear what it is."

"I wish you would promise me never to believe anything—*anything*, mind—that you may hear against me about that obnoxious past of mine without first telling me and giving me a chance to defend myself. I dare say a girl in that position—in an inferior theatre, you know—would do many things that you would consider incorrect, or—even unpardonable. If you ever hear that I have done such things, you won't condemn me unheard, will you? If anything were to break up our friendship, Lotte, I think it would put the finishing touch to my trouble. I don't think I should care to go on living."

"Baby!" said Charlotte, surprised, and a little touched, too, by the sudden intensity of the other's manner. "Simpleton! to cry because that ill-natured woman showed a sign of her real feeling for you"—for there were brimming tears in Molly's eyes—"the idea of noticing it! Yes, I'll give you the promise you want willingly enough, my dear. I should bemoan the break-up of our friendship quite as much as you would, Molly, my child, so don't worry yourself about that."

Molly stood a moment or two longer, with a wistful, irresolute look on her face, as if she wanted to say something more, but doubted the advisability. She walked away at

last with the something more still unsaid, and Charlotte heard her sigh softly to herself as she picked up her sun umbrella and turned toward the house.

The little scene left rather an impression on Lady Mirfield's memory. She could not get rid of a notion that there was a great deal more meaning behind Molly's entreaty for a fair hearing than she was aware of; but her sympathies were all with the poor little soul. There was not an ounce of wicked blood in her—of that she felt sure. Whatever questionable secrets there might be in her past, Molly had been more sinned against than sinning; she had not deliberately done wrong: everybody who knew her must know that.

When Mrs. Mirfield had acted so promptly upon Molly's advice to ask her questions of Lord Netley himself she scarcely intended to carry the thing through there and then; but her temper carried her a little beyond herself, and she had sent her name in to his lordship, by the servant she found waiting in the hall, before she quite realized to what she was committing herself.

It was the first time for many a year that she had called individually on her brother-in-law; their dislike was quite mutual; perhaps hers was even a little the stronger of the two, because she did not let any of it off in open abuse as he did.

On this occasion he received her with a politeness which set her inwardly shaking. He was awfully bent and feeble, she saw at a glance; but his eye was as steady as ever, and, judging him by the past, she expected very little real amiability from him when he started an interview with an extra touch of politeness.

"Quite an unusual honor," he said quietly, when Parker had set her a chair facing his master. "It must be business of vast importance that has induced you to bestow this rare pleasure upon me. Parker, you may go. Mrs. Mirfield has not called on me to discuss my failing health, nor the weather, nor yet the crops; this is an interview with a special purpose—a purpose at which we shall arrive more speedily if left to ourselves. And now, madam, what is it?" he asked, looking straight at her, as the door closed on the retiring Parker. "Has that admirable son of yours

been adding fresh laurels to the family renown? Do you want me to use my influence again to save him from a jail? Is it any fresh disgrace?

The attack on her son roused up her spirit as probably nothing else would have done.

"If it is a fresh disgrace," she exclaimed, with sudden vehemence, "it comes nearer home to you than George's doings could. If it is a disgrace, it is one you have brought on yourself, in your eagerness to shut your brother's son out of the family, in your hurry to acknowledge any connection, however low and shameless, who would help you to keep him there."

It was over thirty years since the Honorable George Mirfield had married Alice Borthwicke to save himself from the difficulties brought about by his inveterate gambling—a vice inherited by his son—and in all those thirty years Mrs. George Mirfield had never ventured to say out what was in her mind to her imperious brother-in-law as she had said it now. It surprised him a little, but it in no way angered him; real anger was rare with him.

"My good creature," he said, with a gentle condescension which galled her almost beyond endurance, "you will please remember that the lady you are calling foul names is my daughter-in-law. My son wiped out her past when he married her."

"But did he marry her? Are you sure she was his wife? Do you know what people are saying? They are hinting that it was only the usual sort of thing after all, that——"

"Pooh, pooh!" interposed his lordship, with a slight wave of his hand, as if he had brushed away a harmless insect, "much envy has made you mad, my dear lady. You have no conception what poor folly you are talking. Do you imagine I should lay myself open to a thing of that kind? You may tell your friends and gossips that Lord Netley knew quite well what he was doing when he invited his grandson to make his home at Netley Fallow. Not even my abhorrence for your son, Mrs. George Mirfield, would have induced me to open my doors to my son's mistress and his bastard. They are what they profess to be, you may take my word for that."

She accepted her defeat with sullen submission. She

rose and turned toward the door, and stopped suddenly as the recollection of Lessman's story came to her again. Those words she had overheard; there must be some meaning to them.

"I wish you would give me the name of the church where the marriage took place," she said. "It would stop a lot of gossip."

Apparently he saw the force of this remark, for he gave the address without hesitation.

"St. Margaret's in the Meadows, Southwark. Rather incongruous it sounds nowadays, but I suppose there were meadows there when the church was built."

"I suppose so," she answered lamely, and turned to go. But he held out his hand.

"Shake hands, Mrs. Mirfield," he said; "your disappointment over this business is natural enough; there is no reason why we should nourish ill-will over it. I have had enough of dissensions in my life. Perhaps it is a sign of approaching infirmity, but I am beginning to wish for peace at last. Shake hands, and accept the inevitable as pleasantly as you can."

Mrs. Mirfield did as she was bid as graciously as she could, though graciousness could hardly be counted among her strong points; and, indeed, she was too thoroughly beaten just then to appear to even as much advantage as usual.

"My ideas are all upside down," she said to Lessman, when she got upstairs, for she felt it necessary to refresh her drooping courage by another chat with her co-conspirator. "There can be nothing wrong with the marriage itself; of that I feel certain from the earl's manner. So what in the world could she have meant about the child's legal rights, and about me finding out the truth?"

"You take my advice, Mrs. Mirfield," said Lessman, with the air of an oracle, "and don't be driven off having a look at the certificate yourself. What it is I can't take on myself to say, but there is something wrong somewhere, I'd lay any money. That Mrs. Arthur ain't everything she should be, or she wouldn't have gone on with Mr. Garth as she did this morning."

All of which Mrs. Mirfield felt quite as forcibly as Lessman, and yet what could she do?

She could get the copy of the marriage certificate certainly, and she did, and found herself just where she was before. Whatever the foul mark was against Mrs. Arthur, there was no sign of it on the certificate of her marriage with Lord Netley's son.

CHAPTER VIII.

ABNEY GARTH CARRIES OUT HIS PROMISE.

THE heat in the London streets was stifling this breathless August evening. In the narrow courts and alleys it must have been intolerable. Even in the respectable width of the Marylebone Road, down which Abney Garth was speeding in a quick, smooth-running hansom, the air met one in hot, lifeless puffs from the corners of the side streets—puffs which told their own story of the exhausted stagnation of the atmosphere in the places they came from.

Everybody looked done up with the heat, from the weary people dragging their feet along the blistering sidewalks, after their long hours of work, to the fagged physician in his easy carriage, rolling home to his excellent dinner after the well-paid labors of the day; and Abney Garth, though he had not been in the vitiated town atmosphere long enough to get thoroughly enervated, was looking as done up and fagged as anybody. But the cause of his worn, harassed look possibly came from within rather than without, for Abney was worrying himself into a positive fever over his coming interview with Mrs. Marston.

What if she should refuse to fall in with the plans he had made for her? What if she chose, in spite of his efforts to prevent it, to bring her case before the people at Netley Fallow?

From what he had seen of her, he did not think she was likely to make herself obnoxious. But still, one could hardly count with certainty on what a woman in her unhappy position would do; and if she was not satisfied with the arrangement he had made for her future comfort—if, in short, she had ambitious dreams of a life of idle ease, dependent on the generous bounty of the Mirfields, he

hardly saw how he was to prevent the whole truth of Mirfield's faithlessness from reaching his wife's ears; and at the thought of what the discovery would mean for her a groan rose from his all-enduring, faithful heart. At the expense of his whole life's ambition, at the cost of the entire annual income he received from Lord Netley, this woman's existence must be kept a secret, and things at the Fallow must not be shaken out of their present state of calm.

All this was in his mind as he drove from King's Cross to Bayswater, through the close heat and dust of an August evening in London. But before he had been five minutes in the presence of the lady he had travelled from Yorkshire to see, his worry and anxiety had taken an entirely new direction. He found that, instead of being inconvenienced by the exorbitancy of her claims, his only trouble would lie in inducing her to accept anything; this disinclination extending even to his help in obtaining employment.

He saw how heavily this lonely fortnight had pressed upon her; her eyelids were so swollen that her eyes looked half their natural size, and her cheeks had fallen in and so altered the shape of her face that he could hardly recognize the pretty little creature he had left behind him on the day of Mirfield's death. He felt a sudden compunction as he thought of the solitary, silent hours of grief she had gone through, and remembered that they had been of his arranging.

"This lonely fortnight has been hard on you," he said, "cruelly hard. I feel that I ought not to have asked it of you."

"It has been a little hard," she admitted. "I was always a bad one at putting up with pain or trouble, and having to keep it all to myself hasn't made it any easier to bear. But we won't talk about that now," she added, with a sharp, abrupt change of manner, as her lips grew unsteady, "or I shall begin the everlasting tears again, and I've cried enough to last me the rest of my life. I was so glad when I got your letter last night, Mr. Garth. I wouldn't have broken my word to you for anything. I promised to keep quiet here till you came, and I've done

it; but I can't stand any more of this quietness. You must set me free from my promise. I want to be doing something for myself; I shall get over my trouble twice as quick when I am busy."

She hurried along as if she was afraid he might want to interrupt her; but he listened quietly to the end.

"That is just what I came to see you about," he said. "Though I have not been able to get to you before, I have been thinking a great deal about you, and I came to the same conclusion—that occupation would be the very best thing for you."

"Oh, yes, the very best thing!" she repeated emphatically, and waited, seeing that he had more to say.

"And I even went so far as to make one or two inquiries on your behalf——"

"Oh, but," she interposed, "I would rather not trouble you any more, Mr. Garth. You have been kindness itself to me. Not one in a hundred, knowing the truth as you do"—she faltered slightly and colored as if there was an implied humiliation in the allusion—"would have been as generous and—and considerate as you have been. And that is just why I don't want to be any further bother to you. I shall do well enough—I got along all right before—before—when I had to look after myself, I mean; there's no need for you to trouble yourself about me, you know."

He waited again quite quietly until he was sure she had finished her jerky nervous, flurried little sentences, keeping his eyes away from her face, because he understood intuitively a great deal of what she was going through. But he looked up when she stopped, and smiled very warmly; and Abney Garth's smile, when it did come, was very real and full.

"I am going to make a confession," he said, with that full, pleasant smile lighting up his face. "As I came here I was wondering what I should do with you if you were very rapacious in your claims——"

"Claims!" she put in, "I have none!"

"And now," he went on, "I am wondering instead how much you will allow me to do for you."

"I have no claims," she said again—"not a shadow of a claim. I never had; that's what frets me."

"Then," he said very gently, "let me do, out of pure friendship for poor Mirfield, what you will not accept from me as a right. Let me help you to put the past behind you, and start afresh."

She hesitated just a moment, her lips twitching in a way that made his heart ache for her; then she lifted her hand and gave it to him.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, and he knew by her tone that she would do it, however uncongenial it might be.

"I have a letter here from a lady whom I knew ten years ago, when I was knocking about London, a lad with literary inclinations. She is a novelist—a very successful one, too; her name in private life is Mrs. Benyon. Well, I ventured to write to her about you—mentioning no names, of course—and she answered by return of post. I will read you what she says:

"I have been looking out for an amanuensis and reader for the past three months, and have not found one yet to my liking. Do you think the lady you wrote about would care to try her hand at the job? So long as she writes a good hand, reads well, and has not an unpleasant voice, I should make no objection to her on the ground of her past. If we could know the *real*, the *actual* past of quite half of our acquaintances, would they come through the ordeal with cleaner records than this ill-used young woman, think you? I doubt it! To me it seems that nowadays the one unpardonable sin is, to be found out. Send your unhappy little friend to see me—I will never so much as remember that she has a past—and if there is any touch of congeniality in our natures we may spend many pleasant and profitable years in one another's society."

"She is a good woman," said Garth, as he folded up the letter. "She does not pose as being good—she even takes a delight sometimes in shocking the too tender prejudices of those who do; but, with all her heedlessness of the world's opinions, she has more real charity in her heart, and does more real good in her quiet way, than half the professed lady philanthropists in London. Will you go to her?"

There was a little silence before the answer came.

"Yes, I will go. I'm afraid she won't like me, and perhaps I shan't like the work, but I will go and do my best. When such people as you and her trouble yourselves to think about a woman in my position it's not likely I should be such an ungrateful fool as to throw your goodness back in your faces. Give me the address, and the right time to call, and I'll go, and try honestly to carry out your wishes. If I break down you may be sure it won't be for want of will, and in any case you may rest contented that I won't be any further trouble to you."

"Time enough to talk about that when this plan has failed," said Abney, writing the address and handing it to her. "I don't believe you will fail; I believe you and Mrs. Benyon will hit it off exactly. I have only one more thing to ask of you—that under no circumstances whatever will you be tempted to allude by name to any member of Lord Netley's family."

"Can you think it! I shall try to do as you said—put the past behind me. I wonder if anybody ever does really do that! Hardly, I'm afraid."

And as Abney Garth drove back to his hotel he found himself repeating her sad little "Hardly, I'm afraid!" with a prophetic feeling which he would fain have put from him if he could.

And yet he slept better that night than he had done since this worry had first fallen upon him. This settlement of Mrs. Marston's immediate future had eased his mind of some of its weight.

Those words of poor Mirfield's, "The greatest wrong a man can put on an innocent woman I've put, and I look to you to see that it doesn't bear more heavily on her than is possible after I'm gone," had lost most of their trouble for him now.

To the very best of his ability he had seen that Mirfield's wrong-doing did not bear heavily on the head of his innocent victim, and he felt that all he had done had been for the best.

Nobody was wronged by the suppression of certain facts, Lord Netley was saved yet another humiliation at the hands of the younger members of his family, and Lady

Mirfield was spared the knowledge of much that would have been as the bitterness of death to her.

"And this of itself," he admitted, as he dropped off to sleep—"this of itself would have induced me to go through twice as much lying and scheming and trouble as I have gone through, and so what is the use of blinking my eyes and refusing to look the truth in the face?"

Two days later, when the post-bag arrived at Netley Fallow, it brought two letters, addressed in feminine hands, for Abney Garth; one was signed, "Your very greatly obliged friend, Ernestine Benyon," and the other, "Always yours gratefully, M. Marston."

From the relieved expression on his face as he tore them up it was evident that the information they conveyed was of a satisfactory nature.

So that chapter in his life was closed, most likely for ever. Mrs. Benyon was not a woman who jumped lightly at conclusions. She had good grounds for her warmly expressed opinions concerning her new amanuensis; the chances were that Mrs. Marston had found a permanent home, and that he would never be called upon to do anything more in the fulfilment of his promise to the dead man. And he drew a sigh of relief and turned his attention to those pleasanter possibilities which the future might hold for him.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. GEORGE MIRFIELD MAKES HER FIRST DEFINITE MOVE.

For a whole year the world moved onward and left things as they were at Netley Fallow.

And yet scarcely as they were, perhaps. Lord Netley's infirmity had increased considerably, but so gradually that nobody noticed or was alarmed by it. His two daughters-in-law, on the other hand, had grown younger in this year of peaceful quiet. Time had smoothed out the hollows and lines which grief had imprinted on their faces during the earlier months of their sorrow. And Abney Garth,

too, looked less grave and less careworn than he had looked a twelvemonth ago.

It had been of necessity a year of retirement, a year of domestic happiness for the two young mothers; and they had devoted it mainly to the worship of their darlings, and to the steady increase of that friendship which dated its commencement from the moment of their first meeting.

And all this long year the mysterious catastrophe anticipated by Molly had not come to pass, and all this long year Lessman had watched and listened at odd corners and doors and windows with the most untiring assiduity, and for her pains was no wiser on the matter nearest her heart than she had been. But she still held on manfully. That there was something against Mrs. Arthur she knew, and if patience and perseverance could find it out, it would be found out; and then, perhaps, that little upstart and his mother would have to clear out from the Fallow, and leave more room for those who had a better right there.

Well, August was round again, and the ladies had cast off their heavy crape gowns, and Molly was feeling so ridiculously young and happy that she wondered sometimes, when she went to her own room—after her nightly chat and quick, warm “good-night” kiss to Lotte in hers—whether such a beautiful state of things could last. She was always asking herself what would happen to break up this happy monotony, and when at last it was broken up it was by something so absurdly commonplace that she laughed at the memory of her own tragic forebodings.

Baby Daisy had spots.

Amelia, Artie’s own especial attendant, came flying into Molly’s room one morning with Lord Mirfield, still in his night-gown, in her arms.

Miss Daisy had got some spots on her arms and chest, and Amelia was of opinion that they were scarlet fever spots, or, at the very least, measles. Would Mrs. Arthur keep Lord Mirfield there with her until the doctor had been and given his opinion?

But when the doctor came he could not give a decided opinion on the spots for another twenty-four hours. All the same he strongly advised the immediate removal of the little heir.

Lord Netley himself interviewed him on the subject, and sent for Molly to hear what he said.

And between them it was decided that the boy should go away at once by the noonday train, in his mother's care.

Then there set in a period of bustle and excitement; the echoes of it penetrated even to his lordship's study, and disturbed the studious calm of the morning hours. He put down his pen in the very middle of a discussion on the delicate difference between two words of almost the same meaning, always a favorite pastime with translators; put his pen down decisively, and asked Garth if he knew what time the travellers would reach Harrogate.

"I think we will drop work for this morning," he said; "my thoughts won't fix themselves at all. Go to Mrs. Arthur, Abney, and see if you can be of any use to her in making her arrangements. Send Parker to read the newspapers to me; and, Abney, if Mrs. Arthur would like to have you, you might see them safely to the end of their journey."

Garth found Mrs. Arthur in her little son's bedroom, superintending the packing of his wardrobe. The boy himself had already been sent off with Amelia to the lodge, to await the start there, beyond the immediate reach of contagion.

Molly turned eagerly to Garth the moment he appeared.

"I've been wanting to see you," she said. "I was afraid I should have to leave without a word with you. Isn't it cruel? I shall have to go without saying 'good-by' to Charlotte or poor little Daisy. She won't leave the mite's bedside for a moment, and she sent out word by Lessman that I was on no account to venture in."

"That she would never forgive you if you went in, ma'am," corrected Lessman, going busily on with her task of fitting neatly folded linen into the portmanteau in front of her.

"I think it would be unwise," Garth said, and added, with a glance at the open door leading into the next room, "I have a message from Lord Netley."

Molly took the hint at once, and with a final word or two of direction to Lessman, followed him into the day nursery, and closed the door behind her.

Lessman's eyes sparkled as she glanced at the closed door.

"Well, this long, happy time of peace and quietness is broken up at last, Abney," Molly said sorrowfully. "It has been so very peaceful and so very happy that I can't help feeling low-spirited at the prospect of a change."

"But only a temporary change," he answered. "Things will have returned to their old groove in a few weeks' time at the farthest."

"Don't you know life better than that yet?" she asked, with a faint little shake of her head. "Once disturb things out of their old grooves, and they never return to them exactly as they were before—never! It seems strange, but it is true, Abney, as true as death."

"Yes, there is something in that, I dare say," he admitted. "But, as far as we can foresee, there is not likely to be any bad results from this short separation. Stapleton does not think seriously of Daisy's illness. He has only advised Artie's removal because he thinks it best to be on the safe side. He said so to Lord Netley after you had left the room. In six weeks' time we shall be jogging along again, scarcely conscious that there has been any interruption to our pleasant routine."

She smiled a slight, disbelieving smile, and he let the subject drop.

"Lord Netley sent me to see if you would like me to come with you?" he began.

"Come with me?" she cried, opening her eyes wide on him. "Come with me and leave Charlotte just when she most needs comfort and support? Oh, no, indeed, I would not be so cruel to you both!"

A quick, dark-red flashed into his face, and left it again instantly—left it looking of an altogether different color to its usual healthy, clear pallor. He said nothing, but the pained astonishment of his whole bearing could not be mistaken.

"Now I have done it!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands in swift penitence. "After all these months of care and watchfulness I have let it out at last! I am so sorry, Abney. Please don't look so distressed about it. I could not help knowing it, you know."

"Could you not?"

The inquiry came with a touch of bitterness at his own expense. "Am I, after all, such a shallow, transparent fool that all the world sees and laughs at my folly, has seen and laughed at it these ten years past, in spite of my efforts to keep it from becoming apparent and offensive."

It was Molly's turn to look troubled now, but her trouble did not subdue her as his did; it made her indignant.

"You must be mad to talk like that!" she cried. "Folly, indeed! I should not call it a proof of folly—I call it very good taste. And as for its offensiveness—why, Abney, you have been a very Sir Galahad of delicacy."

"Hush!" he said harshly, "you will be overheard."

He walked away to the window, with his hands in his pockets, and it struck her with a curious little shock of surprise that, in all her knowledge of him, she had never seen him do such a thing before. It was a foolish, insignificant trifle to notice, but coming just then it seemed to accentuate the difference between him and other men. And how different he was! It seemed almost past belief that he should have loved a woman, and lived in constant intercourse with her for ten years, without betraying his passion by word or sign. And for these last three years the association had, for the better part of the time, been daily and hourly, and even under that test he had kept his secret.

Until now she had always thought his love for Charlotte had been the natural outgrowth of her widowhood, and had wondered often at his impregnable self-control now that she knew that self-control was the result of ten long years of systematic self-restraint. She began to understand that to endure in silence had become a second nature to him, and she also began to understand his bitterness at finding his secret known.

She went up behind him. With any other man she had ever known she would, under the same circumstances, have slipped her hand through his arm and pressed it confidentially while she offered her humble words of comfort; but not with Abney Garth. Firm and unassailable as their friendship was, it had never, and never would reach that point where personal familiarity begins. Utterly selfless he could be, but not open-hearted. He was capable of

great, generous sacrifices in the cause of friendship—sacrifices which not one man in a hundred would feel called upon to make. But his reserve would always stand between him and the appreciation due to his unselfishness. He was not a man with whom it was easy to be familiar at any time, and just now perhaps less than ever. It was something of a humiliation to find this weakness of his guessed at after the successful concealment of these long years.

Molly felt something of this, and it checked some of her natural impulsiveness. She went up behind him and laid her hand on his coat-sleeve with a touch he was scarcely conscious of.

"Abney," she said, "I don't believe there is a person in the wide world who guesses at your secret but me. And even I should not have seen how things were with you if she, Charlotte, had not first set me watching."

He turned as if she had struck him, white to the lips.

"She knows, then?" he asked hoarsely.

"Oh, no, no! I don't mean that! I mean—oh, Abney Garth, why are you so stubborn in your humility? I mean that your ten years of silent devotion are producing their impression at last."

"My God!" he muttered, breathing hard, his dark, deep-set eyes searching her face almost as if he suspected her of trifling with him. "But it couldn't be, it could not!" he went on passionately, all his calmness carried away for the moment by that suggestion of hers. "Ever since she was sixteen she has known me as a sort of living reference book; she has grown accustomed to come to me in any trouble, but to her I am scarcely a man. I am a mere piece of furniture; I have no place in her heart; she does not think I have feelings like other men. God of Heaven, if she knew!"

He broke off with a short, quivering laugh.

"I tell you," said Molly again, feeling inclined to cry for his sufferings, "I tell you she does know, or she is beginning to know, she is beginning to feel. Abney, you are going to be so happy that it will compensate you for all you have gone through."

"No," he answered, "that will never be; I was not born

for happiness." He stood a second or two looking down, and then lifted his eyes to her, with their old steadfastness restored. "How did all this come about?" he asked quietly. "How is it we are discussing my hopeless folly instead of your travelling arrangements? You have somehow surprised me into a confession of my madness, little friend, but you won't take any advantage of it, I know. If I ask you to promise me never to allude to this nonsense again, never even to look at me as if you knew of it, I think you will do it?"

"Yes, I will do whatever you ask of me—you know that. There is nothing that you could ask that I would refuse. But just one more word, Abney, before we drop the subject—Charlotte! My first thought must be for her. Don't, in your desire to immolate yourself, forget that you may immolate her also."

"That is a mistake," he said, with a faint smile, as if the idea amused him. "If you had seen Lady Mirfield in her happier time, as I have seen her, if you had even seen her during the two seasons of her married life in town, seen how brilliant and gracious she could be when she wished, seen how she was besieged and run after by men whose admiration is thought worth having, you would be amused yourself at the notion of her bestowing a thought upon a mere household drudge, her father-in-law's amanuensis. Pooh! what folly to waste words on it! Mrs. Arthur, will you accept my services as courier for this journey to Harrogate? And that reminds me of an idea I had in my head before you startled all the common sense out of me. Don't you think you had better go to Leuville instead of Harrogate?"

"To Leuville?"

The suggestion apparently took her by surprise.

"Yes, I think you should go, and this may be your only opportunity of getting away alone."

"But Lord Netley?"

"Write, when you have been away a day or two, saying that the climate does not seem to suit the boy, and that you are going to give him a taste of his native air. Don't give them enough warning to stop you; start directly you have posted your letter, and and write again when you arrive."

"I suppose I ought to go," she said, pondering over her words; "and yet it seems like daring fate to take Artie there."

"But why? There are only a few simple fishermen and their families in the place, as you know yourself; they are not likely to notice the similarity of the boys' names."

"No; and yet—you know Abney, I am quite certain that, sooner or later, it will be found out that my boy is not Arthur Mirfield's lawful son, and it seems to me that this visit to Leuville may help to hurry on the discovery."

"That is only imagination. I don't see how it can in any way; and I really think you ought to take this opportunity of getting across."

"Yes, I suppose I ought. As you say, there is no knowing when I shall get another opportunity."

"And will you have me with you to-day?"

"No, thank you; it is not in the least bit necessary. I shall manage quite well by myself. You will send me just a line from day to day telling me how Daisy gets on? Charlotte won't have time to think of it."

"Yes, I will keep you posted in all matters here. At any rate I will drive into York with you and see you off. Are you well on with your packing?"

"Yes, mine is quite finished, and Lessman had nearly finished Artie's when you came up."

But when she went back to the next room she found that Lessman was just where she had left her in the packing.

She had been fetched away, she said, and had only that moment got back again, but a few minutes would finish it now.

Molly did not believe she had been fetched away, but she had no suspicion of the real cause of the delay; she thought it was simply another instance of Lessman's unwillingness to do anything for Artie, and let the matter drop without remonstrance.

Lessman's first action, when the portmanteau had been carried away and she had the room to herself, was to draw an old envelope and a pencil from her pocket and write down a few words.

"She sha'n't tell me I've made a mistake this time," she muttered, as she read them over. "I know I've got

them word for word now, and we'll see what Mrs. Mirfield makes out of them. That woman is no more the Honorable Mrs. Arthur Mirfield than I am!"

It happened, however, that it was some time after Molly's departure before Lessman had an opportunity of imparting her new piece of information to Mrs. Mirfield. Daisy's spots turned out more seriously than had been anticipated, and in the anxious days that followed there was no time for tale-bearing nor chatter of any kind.

Molly and her boy had been away from the Fallow nearly three weeks before Daisy was so far out of danger that people could begin to think about anything else, and it was characteristic of the pertinacity of the woman that, when Lessman was at last able to take an evening off duty, she should devote it to following up her grudge against Lord Netley's heir, instead of enjoying her usual two or three hours of Parker's society.

She found Mrs. Mirfield in the garden, watching the process of watering, and talking to the gardener. To talk with somebody was a necessity with the lonely woman; she would have stopped a tramp passing her gate rather than not talk at all. At the sight of Lessman coming up the walk her eyes brightened involuntarily. She was on chatting terms with most of the servants from the Fallow, but Lessman, because of the antagonism which they had in common against Mrs. Arthur, was her very especial crony.

"I've brought something to show to you, ma'am," the woman began. "I've been wanting to get a quiet word with you for weeks past, but I could not leave the house while Miss Daisy was in any real danger. Yes, she is going on nicely now, thank you, or I shouldn't be here. Shall we go inside, Mrs. Mirfield? I don't want to be seen giving you a paper by anybody from the house. Things can't go on as they're going much longer, and when the flare-up comes I don't want to be mixed up in it at all."

Mrs. Mirfield led the way at once to her own private sitting-room at the back of the house; in her eagerness it was as much as she could do to keep herself from running. Lessman's manner could mean only one thing—triumph over Mrs. Arthur.

"You know, ma'am," she went on, when they were seated close together, and at a safe distance from the door, "you know you have always declared that I must have been mistaken about what I heard Mrs. Arthur Mirfield say to Mr. Garth that time, a year ago, when he was going away to London."

"Well, how could I think anything else, Lessman? You told me that she said the boy had no legal rights, and then I got a copy of the certificate of the marriage between her and my nephew to satisfy myself. I even showed it to you. What else could I think but that you had put a wrong meaning on her words, even if you had not mistaken the words themselves?"

"Well," said Lessman, her eyes dancing with excitement, "it has stuck in my throat all this time that I could not make you believe what I said, and I have always hoped that I might get hold of something some day to make you believe. It's turned a year since I heard that other business, and now at last I've heard something else—only this time I wrote it down when I heard it—I'd made up my mind you shouldn't accuse me of mixing things up again. Will you just read what I've wrote on the back of that envelope, and tell me if you think there can be any mistake about the meaning of that?"

Mrs. Mirfield took the envelope and went over to the window and read out the pencilled words slowly by the fading light.

"I am quite certain that, sooner or later, it will be found out that my boy is not Arthur Mirfield's lawful son."

"You heard her say that?" she asked, going quickly back to the table when she had read it through. "You heard her yourself?"

"Yes, I heard her myself. Mr. Garth came up to her while I was packing that little upstart's things, and they went into the day nursery and left me packing in the next room, and I don't mind confessing that I put my ear right against the keyhole and listened with all my might; and you mark my words, Mrs. Mirfield, there is mischief afoot in this stay away of hers. I could not hear all they said—

Mr. Garth I could hardly hear at all—but I heard enough to know that there is some double-dealing going on during her stay away from the Fallow.”

“If I could only get at what it means,” Mrs. Mirfield said. “If I only knew in what direction to look for the mystery.”

“Well, I’ve tired myself out thinking about it,” Lessman answered, “and all I can think of is that Mr. Mirfield’s son is dead, and this boy is some brat they have put in his place.”

“Good gracious, Lessman!”

“Yes; you see it’s this way. We know Mr. Mirfield had a son, and if he was living his mother would certainly have brought him here. Well, she hasn’t. She says herself that she’s brought somebody who isn’t Mr. Mirfield’s son, and I say she wouldn’t have done that while the real son was living. You may depend on it the real little heir is dead, and this boy is only a make-believe.”

“I wonder if that is really it?” Mrs. Mirfield was growing flushed and tremulous with the agitation of the mere supposition. “I wonder how I can find out?”

“Couldn’t you send to the place where Mrs. Arthur came from and find out if they lost their baby?”

“Yes, of course. I—I could send my son. He is already in France. It would not be much trouble to him, and he would go willingly enough when he knew what it was for. But, Lessman, there is one thing now that I can’t reconcile myself to—Mr. Garth’s share in this business. We don’t like one another—he’s too big by far for his place—and I always give him a quiet setting-down when I can, so it’s not likely he would be partial to me; but all the same I don’t think he is the kind of man to lend himself to a thing of this sort.”

“Perhaps he’d do it to keep your son out, ma’am.”

“No, I don’t believe he would.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about that part of the business,” said Lessman. “I don’t see much of Mr. Garth. Parker don’t like him, but then I see a bit through that—Parker’s been twice as long with Lord Netley as Mr. Garth has, and he’s jealous of him—that’s the truth. Mr. Garth seems the perfect gentleman, and Mrs. Boston she thinks

the world of him. But still, there you are! Mrs. Arthur told him to his face that the boy wasn't who he pretends to be, and he puts up with it and makes no sign."

"Yes, it is certainly very incomprehensible."

Mrs. Mirfield sat so long lost in thought that Lessman got up and prepared to go.

"Of course you'll do as you think proper in the business," she said. "I brought the news to you partly because you didn't believe me before, and partly because I thought it concerned you more than anybody else. You must use it or not, according to your own inclination; it isn't likely that I should do anything about it, you know."

"Have you told anybody else anything about it?" asked Mrs. Mirfield, rousing herself with an effort.

"No, I haven't; not a soul, not even Parker."

Mrs. Mirfield was evidently quite in Lessman's confidence.

"I know how things of that kind travel round, and I don't want to have it traced back to me, and lose my place through it. It would make me wretched to have to leave my little darling, and I know Lady Mirfield wouldn't take two thoughts to it if she heard I'd been talking about the private affairs of the family."

"But she won't hear; you may make yourself quite comfortable about that," Mrs. Mirfield assured her, "and I am very much obliged to you for coming to me."

Lessman turned, when they had reached the door, with a sudden thought.

"You'll copy those words down in your own handwriting, and destroy the envelope with my name on, won't you?" she said.

And when Mrs. Mirfield had reassured her on that point she went, and left that lady sitting, with the envelope still between her fingers, in the quickly closing twilight.

And the darkness had shut everything from her view before she moved. She could not quite make up her mind what to do. Should she write to George, who was already in Paris, and ask him to run up to the little fishing-village on the Normandy coast where most of Arthur Mirfield's married life had been passed, or should she go up to London herself and see her brother Clement, a retired solicitor, who

lived in chambers in Gray's Inn, and talk the matter over with him before she took any steps in it?

As a rule, there was no great intimacy between Clement and her, for Mrs. Mirfield had done her best to drop her own people since she became a member of Lord Netley's family circle, and it was the memory of the snubbings she had administered to her brother in the past which made her hesitate about applying to him now. He would certainly make himself very unpleasant, and accuse her of forgetting his very existence until she wanted something of him; she knew Clem's little ways of old. And then perhaps he might take advantage of the opening this would give him and come down and make himself at home at Netley Lodge, and this was not to be thought of. When Clem was once in he was a difficult person to get out, and she had no ambition to see her brother's insignificant figure and shabby coat become familiar objects at her dinner-table.

And so her fit of consideration ended in a decision to write to George, although in her heart she knew that, as far as business matters went, Clem would inquire into Arthur Mirfield's affairs, and ferret out whatever mystery there might be in his married life a thousand times better than George would—George, with his habits of easy indolence and his open admission of never doing anything that he could get other people to do for him.

Having once come to the decision, she wrote the letter and sent it to the post at once.

"I shall sleep all the better," she said, "for having made a definite move in the matter."

CHAPTER X.

GEORGE MIRFIELD TAKES UP THE RUNNING.

GEORGE MIRFIELD was still in those rooms *au cinquième*, in the Avenue Wagram, where we left him fourteen months ago. Let his pinches and difficulties be what they might—and it must be acknowledged that he contrived to get plenty of variety into his life, one week dining a party of

theatrical people at the Café de la Paix, and the next borrowing two francs of Mme. la Concierge to pay for a *chateau-briand* at a Duval, or an even humbler Bouillon—through it all he always kept faith with the agent. If he had a run of luck anywhere near quarter-day his first action was always to lodge his rent with the *concierge*.

“Who knows,” he would say to her with his usual air of quiet recklessness when she suggested that monsieur should not incommode himself by paying before the time—“who knows, I may not have the money again for months, and I can’t afford to be turned out on to the pavements. Whatever arrives, I must keep a hole of some sort to myself, so that, if the worst comes to the worst, I can make a decent finish of it in a place where I am known, and where there is somebody who will have the sense to send the news of my death to my mother, without boring her with any of the unpleasant details.”

And Mme. la Concierge would give a puzzled stare into his quiet, careless face, and, after he had passed on, throw up her hands with an exclamation of sorrowful bewilderment.

These English were so astounding! They talked of death with just as much emotion as they talked of the weather. When Alphonse Bremont spoke of his suicide he wept and tore his hair and cursed God for making his life so miserable that it was no longer worth having. But these English, they were so different! They never wept, and as for tearing their hair, well, it would be difficult, certainly—for, see you, they had not enough to lay hold of. But all the same she believed that Monsieur “Mare-fee-ay” meant as much, with his quietness and his tender smile, as ever poor Alphonse had meant, with his curses and sobs and shrieks. She knew these English by this time; they did not exhibit their feelings as we did, but they felt as much—oh, quite as much!—perhaps even more. She comprehended their ways now—oh, perfectly!

And so it happened that when George received his mother’s letter containing the suggestion that there was something peculiar in the past history of Arthur’s little son, and asking him to go to Leuville and make inquiries, he was still living in the same house with Mme. Koek-koek. He and she were still as great friends as ever, and when he

read his mother's astonishing news his first thought was of the friendly *danseuse*. He had almost started to run down to her before he remembered that she was away at Boulogne, like every one else. Who that could get away from this infernal heat would stay in it? And yet what a waste of money this trip to Normandy would be!

He looked irresolutely at the check his mother had enclosed for his expenses to Leuville, and his mind travelled instinctively in the direction of a certain quiet little house which lay back behind the shops in the Faubourg St. Honoré. As long as he had money in his pockets this quiet, decent-looking little house was his nightly resort. And here was he the owner of fifty pounds, which, with a few lucky deals, might in as many minutes be transformed into a thousand.

Just for a second he felt inclined to put the money in his pocket, and devote it to his own uses. He could easily write to the old lady and say he had been to Leuville, and had found out nothing to the detriment of Mrs. Arthur or the boy. But some hitherto unsuspected remnant of sentiment checked the project. He had given his mother quite enough trouble in the past without adding downright theft to his other backslidings. He would go to Leuville to satisfy her. A whiff of sea air would do him good too; and at the thought of the pure salt wind blowing on his face it occurred to him that he had been feeling unusually dull and heavy and lifeless lately, and that this whiff of cool air was just what he had been wanting. So he would be doing good all round to go.

Having once made up his mind, a sudden fierce hatred for the broiling boulevards, for their parched trees, their burning pavements, their omnipresent odors, their dead, lifeless atmosphere, seized upon him and set him to work upon his preparations at once. After having lived through the horrors of two consecutive Parisian summers he suddenly felt that another night in that used-up, vitiated air would finish him off for good, that he must get out of it before the finish of another day.

He sent out for a time-table, pitched a change of clothes into a handbag, and, changing his check on his way to the station, caught the next train going north.

As the sun went down that evening he was standing at the wide-open door of the one little inn of Leuville, watching the crimson deepen, shade by shade, in the hundreds of tiny pools left by the receding tide on the shallow beach across the road, and wondering a little why, for the first time in his life, he found that the quiet of the place soothed instead of bored him. Was he, he asked of himself, with a touch of regret, at twenty-eight, already getting old? Had he already, at an age when most men were only at the opening of their careers, lived the best part of his life? Was he on the verge of foggydom? Had he arrived at the epoch of existence in which people are contented to squat in the shade at the side of the road and watch the younger and the more energetic pushing along toward their distant goals, in the full heat and sunshine of life's contest?

He sighed at the thought. If he was losing his taste for excitement, there was not much left for him, he told himself—nothing else had given him a moment's enjoyment since he made such a mess of things five years ago. Life would be a very empty, neutral-tinted business for him without those curious little instants of time at the roulette-table, when the ball was slowing down and his whole being seemed concentrated into one throb of anticipation as it rolled smoothly off the black and, pausing on the red, saved him from temporary indigence—or perhaps it was the other way about, and he found himself stranded, without the money to pay his cab-fare home. All the same the throb of anticipation was worth having, or had been until now. It was with a sensation that was very like fright that he found himself enjoying the quiet of this soft September evening and experiencing his first touch of distaste for the stifling atmosphere and unholy associations of the roulette-table. If this last pleasure went from him, what was there left?

The landlord, coming up behind him, roused him from his dismal touch of sentiment.

"Monsieur is admiring our *coucher-du-soliel*," he said politely. "Leuville is noted for its fine sunsets, and from nowhere is it seen better, when the tide is low, than from this doorway. See, monsieur, how each little lake becomes a sunset in itself for the moment! Ten minutes later and all the color, so vivid, will have disappeared, and the cold,

pale shore will look like a hearth cumbered with the ashes of the over-night fire, or like a body from which all the warmth and color has departed—the dead body of the day that is gone.”

“Or like a life that is over and done with, yet still continues to exist when it has no longer any joy in existence,” said George, carrying on the allegory out of his own thoughts. “*Bon Dieu, monsieur*,” he broke off, with grim amusement, “but you are a comrade of the most gay! A man comes here because he is enervated and doleful, and you go to rejoice him with your little histories of cold hearths and days that are dead.”

“But monsieur is right!” cried the other, all gayety and animation in a moment. “I am a *misérable* to afflict monsieur with my sad little fancies. One gets like that sometimes by the sea; it has so many poor little stories to tell itself that one takes the habit from it. Monsieur has not already dined? The good-wife is making ready a dinner of the most *recherché* for monsieur, and monsieur will take a bottle of good wine? Monsieur will no longer make himself *énervé* when he shall have drunk a bottle of my good wine.”

“Yes, I will have a bottle of your best, and you shall help me to drink it, monsieur,” said George; “and we will leave the day to finish dying by itself. Madame tells me you have no private parlors; that one must eat in the public dining-room. So much the better; I am not in the mood for solitude. This public room, where is it?”

It was a long, narrow, low-ceiled, stone-floored room, furnished with benches and plank tables; but there were big windows looking across the street to the open sea, and George’s table had been spread with a clean white cloth near one of these, through which the invigorating air was blowing the smell of the wet seaweed.

“So we have not made our adieux to the dying day after all,” said George, as he seated himself by the open window, with his back to the room, and planted his elbows on the table and resumed his study of the sunset. “It is a fine air you have here.”

“Magnificent! Monsieur will find himself so exhilarated in a day or two that he will laugh and sing for no reason whatever.”

George smiled at the notion, the idea of his laughing and singing from sheer lightness of heart struck him as something so entirely out of the range of probability.

"If I stay as long," he said. "I have not come to Leuville with the intention of making any stay."

"That is monsieur's misfortune, then. But perhaps it will happen as it did before. An Englishman came here three summers ago, *en passant*, as monsieur has done, and he stayed two years—until his death, in fact."

"Ah, yes?" said George, with lazy interest. No doubt this was poor old Arthur. Now was his opportunity to ask one or two point-blank questions about this Englishman and his family, and get the business he had come upon over at once.

But he did not do it. He was feeling lazy after his hot railway ride, and disinclined for the least exertion of any kind, and more especially disinclined for just this one particular exertion. He had no love for the task his mother had laid upon him. He did not like the idea of poking and prying into his dead cousin's past, and the nearer the view he got of it the stronger his dislike grew. Such information as came to him without effort of his own he would send to her, but he hardly felt like taking any active steps toward unearthing little particulars which Arthur had chosen to keep concealed.

"And so that other Englishman died here," he said, when the landlord came in again presently with the wine and a basin of soup. The color in the pools across the road was getting very dim now, but there were two or three young peasant women sitting on the end of the sea-wall, nearly opposite the inn, and he was idly interested in the curves of their ankles, as seen above their huge sabots, so that perhaps, on the whole, the outlook had not lost in attractiveness. "You know, monsieur, that does not say much for your vaunted air, and it does not encourage me to make a long visit."

"*Mais, mon Dieu!* it was not Leuville that killed him," cried the landlord, his small wrinkled face alight with indignation at the injustice of the supposition. "When he came here he was already ill. The air here kept him alive a year longer than he would have lived anywhere else."

"Did he stay here with you?" asked George, again, really more because it was his turn to speak than from any interest he took in the answer.

"But, no. He lived with his wife in a little villa—La Bosquet it was called, because of the beauty of its shrubs and trees—half-way up the road leading to the *cimetière* on the top of the rock, where they buried him. Ah, monsieur, it was a sad thing, his death! The poor little madame, his wife, was so heart-broken, and she was so young and fragile to be left without a protector. Everybody here rejoiced themselves when a friend came to fetch her away to live with her husband's family. A tall, majestic man this friend was, with gray hair, and the calm, quiet manner of the English, but a man to be trusted always—one could see that at a glance."

Abney Garth beyond a doubt. George recognized the portrait instantly.

"What was he like—the Englishman who died?" he asked.

"A handsome man—oh, certainly a handsome man—with eyes as blue as those in monsieur's own head. But taller than monsieur, and just such a *carrure* as monsieur, for truly monsieur had a *carrure* of the most wonderful for his height."

George set his wide shoulders back (is there a man in the world who is not proud of the possession of a broad pair of shoulders?) and smiled at the little Frenchman's open admiration.

"Yes," he said, "another three inches in height and I should have been a well-made man; as it is, what I lack in height I make up in muscle. When I was in the army I was the strongest man in the regiment at lifting or carrying."

"Ah, monsieur has been in the service, then? I thought I recognized the *air militaire*. Monsieur has been in the cavalry, if I mistake not?"

"Yes, in the hussars. And you? You have served?"

"But, yes, monsieur; I was in the Sedan catastrophe," came the subdued answer.

"Ah, a bad affair that!" said George, with a touch of sympathy, which the other was keen to note and appreciate; "one of the big blunders of the world."

"Monsieur has reason," was the quiet reply, but the subject was evidently a sore one.

His vivacity had received a temporary check, and he took the first excuse that offered for getting out of the room, leaving George alone in the summer twilight.

But he was not lonely long.

Presently there came into view, round the end of the sea-wall where the peasant women were dangling their legs, an object which made George open his eyes in involuntary astonishment. He had believed himself to be the only shred of civilization in the place; and yet here was a lady, small and dainty in figure, with a clear, transparent pale skin, nut-brown hair, wind-ruffled and wavy, and tender blue-gray eyes, picking her way delicately across the pools, just beyond the roadway, with her white gown gathered up carefully in her tan-gloved hand.

Next behind her came an English nurse, with a boy of three or four perched upon her shoulder, put there apparently to keep him out of the slush of the wet shore.

"By Jove!" said George softly, "I wonder who she is, and what she's doing in this out-of-the-way hole? She's English, and a good specimen too! It's a treat to see a woman put her feet down properly, after the mincing pinickity pavement trot of the Parisiennes."

The lady was laughing, as she looked at the nurse's shoes and then at her own.

"We would not have come if I had known it would be so wet," she was saying, and George was struck with the sweetness of her voice and the clear, happy ring of her laugh.

In Paris the chances are that he would have passed her by without a second glance; but here, by the side of those brown peasant women, with their monstrous sabots, their strident voices, and their abnormal breadth of hip, this dainty, fair, sweet-voiced little lady gained in attractiveness by force of contrast. At any rate that was how he accounted to himself for the sudden unusual interest he felt in her.

He found himself listening almost eagerly for her next words, and he was not at all conscious of the gross absurdity of the situation, when he experienced a sensation of

disappointment on hearing the boy shriek out, "Muvver, muvver!"

When the servant brought in his *fricassée* presently he asked a question or two; but the girl was new to the place, and knew nothing except that the lady was staying at La Bosquet, and went by the name of Madame la Bosquet among the village people.

The three peasant women had risen at her approach, and were standing with arms akimbo, laughing at her energetic attempts to make herself understood. But none of them laughed more heartily than she did herself at her droll blunders, and none of them looked better pleased than she when she succeeded in saying something as they wished it said.

George watched the scene with considerable amusement.

How *spirituelle* her pure, bright little face looked among their big sun-browned countenances, and what a delectable accent she would get if she went on taking lessons in conversational French from these Normandy fishermen's wives. It occurred to him presently that it would only be an act of Christian charity to go and help out her limited vocabulary, and he rose and passed out of the window, leaving his excellent dinner in the middle of an unfinished course.

The little lady was just showing her wet shoes and stockings, and explaining to her sympathetic audience how she had ventured to take a short cut across the shore, when she heard a footstep, and, turning, saw George sauntering negligently across the road, hatless, fair haired, broad-shouldered, tweed-clad, hands in pockets—English all over.

George saw her take him in with a startled, comprehensive glance which looked curiously like dismay. The next instant she had scattered a shower of hurried "*Bon soirs*" among her friends, and was speeding away up the hill, with the nurse close at her heels, as if she were making her escape from a pursuing enemy.

He laughed good-humoredly, and entered into conversation with the ladies of the sabots, who were nothing loth, and in the next ten minutes he learned all their names, the number, names, and ages of their children, and their

husbands' callings; but on the subject of Mme. la Bosquet he learned nothing at all, and he was too old a hand to lay himself open to remark by putting a direct question.

He wandered off presently, hatless as he was, and strolled across the pool-dappled sands to the edge of the still receding tide, and stood there, with the salt breeze playing about his temples and the waves swishing up and down at his feet, till the twilight had changed to night and the stars began to throw quivering reflections on the throbbing blackness of the waters.

He was scarcely thinking at all. The air was infinitely refreshing, and the stillness so soothing that he forgot his avowed distaste for solitude, and thought of nothing but the pure physical enjoyment of the moment.

But he laughed at himself when, his fit of stillness over, he turned back toward the inn.

"If little Fauvelle could have seen him standing there, like a moonstruck fool, gazing away over the sea," was his thought.

The next morning was sunshiny, but breezy and fresh.

Directly after his coffee George went across and sat on the end of the sea-wall, with a yellow-backed novel. But he did not do much reading; he was too intent upon watching the white hill road that led up toward La Bosquet, and he watched in vain.

He could only see the road half-way up, because of a curve it took toward the edge of the cliff, but he could see the shrubs and trees which surrounded the little house on the hillside. He could see one white corner of the house itself, peeping between the greenery, and also a small creeper-covered arbor, perched quite close to the edge of the cliff in the garden behind the house.

In the shadow of this arbor he was almost sure he saw a black figure, seated as if at work; but at that distance he was not able to make out who it was. He saw the child running about the paths, and even heard his shrill childish laughter once or twice in the peaceful quietness of the place, for the Leuville people were all shut up in their closed houses at this time of day.

And so the morning wore away to midday, and George went in to breakfast with an astonishing appetite.

Monsieur Lorton appeared again at breakfast time, as polite, as vivacious, as sentimental as ever.

Would monsieur not like to see something of the surrounding country? He had been thinking of monsieur's *ennui*, and he had sent to a cousin of his, who kept a farm at some little distance, and borrowed a horse for monsieur. Cavalry officers had a passion for riding. Monsieur would accept this little attention at his hands if only because they were brothers-in-arms.

And George accepted, though he would rather have taken his book across the road again and resumed his observation of the garden at La Bosquet; but it was easier to say yes than no, so he gave up his promised afternoon of idling and went.

As for the business he had come upon, that could wait. A day or two could make no difference one way or the other, and perhaps in the mean time he should stumble across some of those details of Arthur's married life after which his mother's soul hankered. Meanwhile his time was not hanging at all heavily on his hands, and the quiet and the fine air was quite setting him up.

The promised mount turned out a rather decent gray cob, fresh for want of exercise, and as full of play as a kitten.

Monsieur Lorton came out, all pride and delight to have obtained this pleasure for his guest, and watched the start.

If monsieur took the hill road past the cemetery he would reach the high plains, where there was excellent galloping for a stretch of five or six miles. And monsieur could tie Napoleon up at the gate of the cemetery, on his way back, and go in and see the grave of his countryman, if he was so inclined.

George took to this idea. He would certainly take a look at his cousin's resting-place; it gave him a reason for his ride, and satisfied his not very troublesome conscience. He should be doing his duty to his mother, and following his own inclination at the same time.

He passed La Bosquet on his way up, but saw nothing but the house itself. All the shutters facing toward the road were closed against the afternoon sun, and the place looked forlorn and deserted, and solitary in the extreme, standing

there, white and still, in the blazing heat. The house was a disappointment on this side; all the prettiness evidently was at the back, facing toward the cliff.

George wondered if everybody was asleep inside, but Napoleon did not give him much time to wonder about anything. The air was exhilarating up there, and the light-hearted animal claimed most of his rider's attention. When they got to the top of the hill George let him go, and they stretched away past the little cemetery and along the cliff top, with the west wind full in their faces, until the gay little beast began to slow down of his own accord.

It was grand up there, with the blue sky above and the bluer sea below, with the soft turf under his horse's feet, and nothing round him but the pure, fresh, intoxicating ether. The shadows were already lengthening when he sighted the cemetery again, on his homeward way, and Napoleon, still gay at heart, had yet lost the first mad exuberance with which he started.

As they neared the gate of the cemetery George saw a female in a hat waiting there, with her back to the road. He grew interested. The Leuville ladies all wore white muslin caps. The figure was clothed in a tight-fitting black gown, and George was so occupied in trying to decide whether it could be the same figure he had seen last night in a loose white bodice that he never noticed the stealthy approach, along the other side of the road, of a small sunburnt imp in a sailor suit of brown holland.

The diminutive creature came along with the lightness and caution of a Red Indian on the warpath, until he was about a yard in front of Napoleon, and then he darted into the road, close before the horse's nose, and pranced wildly, blowing an ear-piercing tin whistle, and waving a flag about twice as big as himself to and fro above his head.

For an instant George's heart was fairly in his mouth. Napoleon was plunging and kicking, with his head down, and the small fiend with the whistle and the flag was rushing in among the brute's pawing hoofs as if he did not understand the existence of such a thing as fear.

It was more than George dared to do to turn the horse and run for it. That little devil would certainly attack

him in the rear, and get a blow from his heels that would knock him into splinters.

He gathered up the bridle tight in one hand, and pulling the horse abruptly to one side, made a big plunge down at the youngster's waistband and fetched him up, sprawling, on to the saddle in front of him. For an instant he lay there kicking, on his back, with a very astonished look in his big gray eyes, but only for an instant.

"Put me up, please," he said calmly, as soon as he could draw a breath. "I can't see nuffink down here. I frightened ve horse booflee, didn't I?"

"You little devil!" said George, giving him a slight shake where he lay, and getting Napoleon a bit in hand now there was no longer that distracting flag fluttering in front of his eyes. "You little devil! I'd fright you beautifully if I had anything to do with you! Where did you spring from, you imp of evil?"

There were two figures now hastening toward him from the cemetery entrance, a white one as well as a black, and above the white gown there was a wild-eyed, colorless little face, full of vivid terror.

"He is not hurt," George sang out, bringing the trembling, snorting horse to a standstill and setting the child up in front of him; "he is not even scratched, I assure you. Pray don't alarm yourself."

"Muvver, muvver," screamed the boy, "see vere Artie is! Did you see me fright ve horse, muvver?"

George swung himself down, with the boy under his arm, and put him into his mother's trembling embrace.

"Naughty Artie!" she said brokenly, "such a very naughty Artie!" and she held him to her as if she had but just realized all he was to her.

"I suppose I ought to scold and beat him," she went on, with a tremulous smile, lifting her swimming eyes to George's face, "but he is all I have in the world—and—I thought I had lost him. You must make allowances for a mother's love."

"I know," said George, looking down at her, with a grave smile of comprehension. "I have gone through it all myself—I, too, am an only son."

"Then you will understand," she said—she was trying

very hard to control herself, but he could see how quickly her breath came and went between her quivering lips, and how convulsively her bosom rose and fell—"you will understand a little of my gratitude——"

"Oh, don't let us go into that," he interrupted, with a slight laugh. "I was glad for once of my length of reach, and there's an end of it. The little chap has got pluck enough for a regiment, but I should recommend you to keep a steady eye on him. Next time it might not end with a mere fright all the way round. Shall I give him a ride down to the gate—you're staying at the little white house on the hill, aren't you?"

But she would not trust the boy out of her arms, and after a few more incoherent words of thanks she held out her hand in token of farewell.

George was going their way, but he made no attempt to accompany them. If she had wanted his company she would not have given him his *congé*. He returned the warm, grateful clasp of her small fingers, and waited there by the roadside, with Napoleon's bridle over his arm, watching them descend the hill in the rosy glow of the sunset.

Through the evening stillness the nurse's first observation came back to him:

"It was just like the things you see done in a circus, ma'am. The darling would have been trampled to death if the gentleman hadn't been one of the best riders in the world."

George did not follow them at once; he strolled across the broad belt of turf between the road and the cliff, and stood there, near the edge, with Napoleon munching the grass contentedly at his side, and watching the sunset through till the end. There was no after-glow to-night; a mass of gray clouds rose suddenly out of the horizon and quenched the warmth out of the sky. But he stood on there some time in the gray twilight, unconscious of the sudden chill in the air, unconscious of all things but one—his Nemesis had overtaken him at last! All at once he found himself wishing that he was an ordinarily respectable member of the community, instead of a social pariah, at whose name mothers with marriageable daughters shivered involuntarily

and drew their flocks closer round them; of whom even good-natured men spoke regretfully as of one utterly lost.

He thought of the look in Madame la Bosquet's eyes as she gave him her hand at parting. How many years was it since a respectable woman had given him such a frank, full, free glance of friendship as that? The knowledge that, when she knew who he was, and all about him, that look of friendship would be changed for one of scared, shrinking distaste, gave him such a feeling of misery as he had not felt for many a day, and made him determine to keep his name a secret from her in any case.

He laughed aloud, and called himself a few hard names, but he did not succeed in laughing the feeling down. He wondered, uncomfortably, what had got hold of him, and finding out all at once that he was cold, he was glad to break away from his own reflections with a muttered curse at the sudden change in the wind.

"I'm chilled through and famished," he said to himself, as he mounted and rode off through the gathering gloom, "and then I'm surprised because I get a fit of the blues. A bottle of old Lorton's best and a bit of fresh-caught turbot and I shall be as fit as a fiddle again. I'll get away from the place to-morrow. I knew I should soon sicken of the quiet."

It was not until he was going to bed that he remembered the visit to Arthur Mirfield's grave, which had been the main object of his ride past the cemetery.

"Ah, well," he said hypocritically, "I shan't be able to get away to-morrow after all. Having come to the dreary place, I may as well find out what there is to find out. And I must take a look at the poor old lad's resting-place."

And even in the privacy of his own thoughts he tried to pretend that the neighborhood of La Bosquet had not influenced him in this decision.

CHAPTER XI.

AN INTERLUDE.

WHEN George woke up the next morning, his fit of the blues had vanished with last night's gray clouds and chill wind. In all this radiant sunshine remorse and regrets seemed out of place, and his usual reckless habit of mind came back to him.

Things should take their own course. Was he such an impressionable as that he could not hold a couple of conversations with a pleasant-speaking little widow without conceiving a tragic passion for her? Stuff and nonsense! He would neither avoid her acquaintance nor strive after it. If it happened that he met her, he would leave it to her to speak or not as she chose, and if he did not meet her, he would not of a definite purpose seek after further intimacy.

And yet—and yet—when he went up the hill to pay that deferred visit to Arthur Mirfield's grave, his footsteps slowed down involuntarily as he neared the small, white, bare-looking house by the roadside, and, dodge the fact as he would, he knew he was disappointed when he had got past without interruption.

But the next instant his steps quickened up again, as he caught sight of a white gown, under a white umbrella, on the headland above, and in the pleasure of the moment he quite forgot his decorous decision to leave it to her to make the first advance toward any further intercourse.

She was sitting on the grass, with her face toward the sea, and the child was asleep at her side, with his bright brown curls pillowed on her knee. She did not see George coming until he was close behind her, but when she turned and recognized the muscular, thick-set figure; in light tweed coming across the grass toward her, such a gladness flashed into her eyes that his heart grew warm within him.

"I am so pleased to see you," she said, putting her hand out to him in eager friendliness. "I was so afraid you might leave this lonely little place without our meeting

again, and I felt that I had not half made you understand how much I owed to you——”

“Oh, please don’t let us allude to that stale business again!” cried George. “I did nothing more yesterday than I’ve done scores of times before for my own amusement. And it hurts my vanity, too, don’t you see. I would far rather that you were glad to see me because you thought I was a pleasant fellow than from any sense of compulsory gratitude for a fancied obligation. I hope you have not suffered from the fright that youngster gave you yesterday?”

She gave way to his wish at once, and since she was not able to express her sense of indebtedness in words, it showed itself in her manner, in the warm liking of her glance, and the quick, soft responsiveness of her replies. And under this delightful encouragement George opened out in a manner that he was astonished at himself.

“When I first saw you on the beach the night before last I thought you were an apparition,” he told her. “I never expected to find a civilized being in the place. When my mother asked me to come here I felt horribly ill-treated; and then, when I saw you picking your way among the pools down yonder, with the crimson glory of the sunset all about you, I thought, just for a minute, that you had been sent here especially on my behalf, to reward me for doing my duty to the old lady.”

“And what disillusioned you?” she asked gayly.

“Well,” he said audaciously, “I’m not sure that I am disillusioned—yet.”

“Oh, but I think you are, though,” she persisted with a quiet little smile. “You said you only thought it ‘just for a minute,’ you know.”

He laughed lazily, as if her keenness amused him.

“So I did. Well, I suppose I found out my mistake when this young man came into view, round the corner of the sea-wall, and called you ‘mother.’ You see, I thought that, with such a claimant as that on your affections, there was in all probability another—I mean—you looked such a child—it never occurred to me—that is—well,” he said desperately, fetching himself out of his fix with an effort, “I mean just this, that it was a surprise to me

yesterday when you spoke of the little one being all you had to love or care for."

"I see; you had not thought of my being a widow." She spoke with perfect self-possession, without a shade of flippancy in her manner. She had lost sight of the hypothesis upon which the conversation had started, and was now only bent upon giving him information. "I had the great misfortune to lose my husband a little over a year ago, when I had been only married three years, and this is the first time I have been away from his father's house since his death. I find a great difference travelling alone."

"Naturally," George answered, with grave politeness. "I think a lady is nearly always at a disadvantage by herself at such times, especially," he added, with a touch of mischief in his smile, "when she has only a limited knowledge of the language of the country she is in."

She laughed up at him in candid enjoyment of the joke against herself.

"You are making fun of my talk with the village women the other evening. You say you took me for an apparition. I assure you I took you for a ghost, when you made your sudden appearance from nowhere in particular in that startling manner."

"I had been listening to your struggles with the idiom for some minutes, inside the window of the inn. I wonder what made you run away in such a hurry when you saw me?"

"Oh, well," she said, speaking in the manner of a person who does not choose to give the real reason of a thing, and so puts a supposititious case, "it is just possible, you know, that my conceit took fright at the idea of your overhearing my school-girl French. Like you, I never expected to meet a civilized creature in this little place."

"It was quite a mutual surprise, then. I came on a little piece of family business, and I confess I came very unwillingly, only my mother had set her heart on it, and so there was nothing for it but to pack up and start."

The blue-gray eyes gave him a look of very undiluted approval. Filial duty was evidently the chief of all the cardinal virtues with her just now. He interpreted the look aright and tried to set her straight.

"You mustn't run away with the idea that I am the model of all that a son should be, though," he went on. "The fact is that it is such a long time since I did anything to oblige my mother that I thought I would take the opportunity when it offered, especially when I had nothing else particular to do. I was glad to be able to please her for once, for I've given the old lady a good many sorrowful hours in my time. I hope this little lad will never make your heart ache as I—I beg your pardon," he broke off, with a careless laugh. "Upon my word, I apologise very humbly for boring you with my little peccadilloes. Do you know, I believe there is something in the air of this place that induces serious thought. I have never been so nearly repentant as since I came here. A month of Leuville and I should be a reformed character."

But though he outwardly laughed off the impulse to be confidential, it remained with him all the same. He was possessed by a longing to tell this little creature with the tender eyes and the mobile, sympathetic lips all about that unfortunate past of his. It was a queer thing for this idea to come to him all of a sudden, for, as a rule, his past was the last thing in the world he thought of dragging into the conversation. God knew there was nothing in it that he could take pleasure in discussing.

"You would take the air of Leuville for diseases of the soul as one takes the waters of other places for physical ailments," said Mme. la Bosquet, with gentle gayety.

"Would to God that were possible!" he exclaimed, turning his face suddenly seaward, and there was such an unmistakable touch of real feeling in his manner that she in turn grew grave and sorry.

"I think there are very few of us who would not wish to come to Leuville if it really had that power," she said very quietly. "It must be a very exceptional person who has not done many things they would wish undone."

He brought his glance back to her face.

"I should hardly think you had done many things of that kind. Judging by your face, I should say your soul was as free from remorse as most people's."

She flushed at the words—a cruel flush that seemed to scorch her skin with its fierce heat.

"Ah, but one must not judge by a face," she cried quickly, and then laughed and looked at him half-shamedly. "See how my face convicts me now," she said. "Does that guilty blush look like a conscience at rest?"

"But you women have such tender consciences," he answered her. "If I had nothing more terrible to repent of than you—well, my mother would be a happier woman, I expect."

"What a serious conversation we are holding!" she said, with an effort at a lighter manner. "We seem to be playing the part of father confessor to one another. Suppose I give a fresh turn to it by introducing something less intense and less melodramatic. Do you intend making a long stay in Leuville?"

He smiled down at her, until now he had been standing, and threw himself on the grass opposite her, with his head supported on his hand.

"I am a man without intentions of any kind," he said. "I let myself drift. It is much easier. And you? Do you stay long?"

"Well, in this matter I am like you, without intentions. There was illness at home, and I brought my boy here out of the reach of it. I am waiting till I get my summons to return."

"It is a jolly little place."

"I like it," she answered; "but I should have thought you would find it too quiet."

"Why do you think that? Do I show so plainly that excitement is the very breath of my nostrils?"

"I don't know that, but perhaps there is a something—how shall I put it? You don't look like a man who took pleasure in rest and quietness as a general thing."

"I don't," he returned shortly, and then added, "I have spent the last few years of my life in trying to escape from it. I would never give myself five minutes for thought if I knew how to avoid it. But I had no idea I showed my weakness so plainly. Thought, I take it, is almost as wearing as intentions are. I like to take things easily."

"And do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Take things easily?"

"Why, yes, I think so."

She looked at him and shook her head slightly, with an unbelieving little smile, and he laughed with a rather found out air.

"I don't believe in people who take things easily," she said. "They haven't got much heart. I don't believe you are heartless. You may make believe that you don't care a hang about anything"—the slang expression came very daintily over her lips—"but I think you do care all the time."

"Why, what a lot you are finding out about me," he said, with indolent amusement. "I shall grow frightened of you presently. Can you read the past in my face?"

"Better than you read mine," she answered, and stopped herself as if she felt she had said enough.

"You like coming up here?" he began again presently, conscious of the little check in her manner and its cause. It was curious that she too should have that inclination to grow confidential, he thought. "You like it better than the village?"

"Yes, the air is better."

He glanced behind her, to where the open gate of the little cemetery stood on the other side of the road beyond the grass.

"And you don't mind the neighborhood of the churchyard?"

"I like it," she said; "I have—a relative buried there. It is a pleasure to me to pay a little respect to the memory of the dead."

He looked at the black ribbons on her hat and dress.

"You do not forget so soon as some folks," he said, with a feeling of grudge against the unknown dead.

She shook her head gravely.

"No," she returned, "I do not forget," and as she spoke she laid her hand caressingly on the boy's sunburnt cheek, as if the words had aroused a sudden tenderness in her heart.

George saw the action without seeming to notice it, and this time his grudge was against the sleeping child. What had that little beggar done to deserve the monopoly of her love? he wondered savagely.

"He is a bonny little fellow," he said; "he would make

a pretty study in pastel." And then a sudden inspiration came to him. "I wonder if you would let me try to make a picture of him?"

"A picture? Are you an artist?" she asked.

"Not a bit of it!" he answered; "but I have a great many artist friends, and I have been dabbling the pastels about a bit in their studios during this last spring and picked up a little of the trickery. I should like to try my hand at an original portrait. Will you let me make the attempt with this young man?"

"I am afraid we should never get him to sit," she said doubtfully; "he is so young!"

"Oh, I will try to catch the likeness as he runs about," said George, with the easy audacity of the amateur. "If you would let me have an opportunity of watching him at play."

She agreed to this willingly, and the arrangement was made then and there. George was to write by that night's post for the paraphernalia, and the portrait was to be started as soon as the things arrived. He was to have the right of *entrée* to the garden at La Bosquet any or every fine morning, until the boy's dinner hour at one o'clock, and do the best he could with the little one running about at his play.

"I shall have to invent a few terrific stories of giants and dragons," he said laughingly, "and catch his expression as he listens. He is rather like you, isn't he?"

"So people say. It is rather a sore point at home among his father's people. They would have preferred flaxen hair and a milk-white skin; but one cannot arrange these things to order."

The boy rode home to the gate of La Bosquet on George's shoulder; he had the knack of getting on with children, and they were the best of friends by the time they reached his halting-place.

Here George made his adieux. He was thoroughly satisfied with his morning's work, and would not jeopardize losing his ground by too much eagerness.

"I suppose I ought to have introduced myself in due form an hour ago," he said, when he had already bid her "good morning," and moved a step or two away from the

gate, "but I never do do the things I ought. My name is Smith—George Smith. I have no cards with me. You see it never occurred to me that I should need one in such a place as this, so you must take my word for it."

"Of course!" she answered. "Why not?"

She laughed a little, nervously, as if she found herself in a sudden difficulty over this matter of the introduction, and then picked the child up and sat him on the closed gate between them.

"One advantage of your name is that it is easy to say and to remember," she said. "Artie, say 'How do you do, Mr. Smith?'"

The child did as he was told, coming to grief, as he always did, over the final th.

"And now tell Mr. Smith your name," she said, still with that touch of nervous disquiet showing itself in her manner.

"My name is Artie, Lord Murphy," replied the mite, getting as near to it as he ever got.

"Artie, Laud, Murphy," repeated George raising his hat with mock ceremoniousness, "and a very pretty name too. Was he christened after the archbishop, Mrs. Murphy? You are evidently not Catholic, in spite of your Irish name. Good morning; Artie won't feel kindly toward me if I keep him away from his dinner."

Mme. La Bosquet took the boy off the gate, and followed him up the path to the house, with a very unusual color in her clear cheeks and a dissatisfied look in her eyes.

Not so George. He sauntered off down the hill without the faintest feeling of compunction for his barefaced falsehood.

He was not going to risk the loss of her friendship by letting her know who he was; with such a reputation as his, one lie more or less was not likely to trouble his conscience much.

Of course he was playing the fool, he knew it as well as he knew that he was a living man, but he meant to go on with it. All his life long he had more or less been playing the fool, and all the folly of his past life was not equal to the folly he was committing now; but all the same he meant to go on with it. He was not quite sure that he

could turn back if he would, but he was quite sure that he would not turn back if he could.

The old gambling spirit was on him, only this time there was no doubt as to the price he would have to pay for the excitement of the game. There was no possibility of gain, he was bound to lose all he staked, and yet he would hold on for the troubled joy of the moment. Let the cost be what it might, he would at least have one memory to look back upon which should not be an unending reproach to him—just a week or so of frank, pleasant friendship with a heartsome, pure-souled woman, *et voila tout*.

And yet if things could have been different. If he had been a man whom a dainty-minded woman could claim as a friend, without feeling that she lost a share of her claim to respectability by the association. If! If! Is there a more terrible word, when used in such a sense, than "If."

If his past had been just no better nor worse than other men's, and he had dared to let this woman see what she was becoming to him. How his eyes glowed at the thought. Then came the inevitable reverse of the picture. How would she look at him, and think of him, if she knew him for what he was—a profligate, who had wasted his father's substance and reduced his mother to comparative poverty; a man whose notions of morality only stopped short at putting his hands openly in his neighbor's pockets; a libertine, who had a woman's broken heart on his conscience, and her blood upon his soul!

He tormented himself by trying to imagine how her expressive face would look as she listened to the recital of his backslidings; but it seemed to him that, no matter how deeply it might shock her, there would still be a look of pity for him in the luminous depths of her tender gray eyes. And at this idea a sudden maniacal wish to tell her all flashed into his mind; to tell her the whole story of that irretrievable mistake of his, and let her—out of the infinite mercy of her woman's heart—judge betwixt him and the verdict of the world.

"I believe she would be a bit sorry for me," came the thought. "Until now I've always objected to people's pity, but I shouldn't mind having hers. I should like to see her looking at me in that way she has, as if she was so

taken up with you and your affairs that she forgot herself altogether. One thing I'm pretty certain of, she wouldn't be hard on me. She would not be hard on any living thing—it's not in her—but to me she would be especially gentle and merciful; if only because I didn't let the cob trample the life out of that young imp yesterday. Good God! how I should like to tell her everything and have her pity."

CHAPTER XII.

A GLEAM OF SUNSHINE ATHWART A SHADOWY PATH.

A WEEK had passed by, and the weather was giving signs of breaking. Sometimes of an evening the wind would whistle through the windows of the little Leuville inn in a way which suggested that summer was on her last legs and turbulent autumn was treading on her heels in his desire to take her place when she should be finished with and out of the way.

One would have thought it was rather weird and eerie in that long, narrow, bare *salle-à-manger* on such evenings, but George Mirfield did not seem to find it so. He sat night after night by the little fire of green wood in the big chimney, at the end of the room furthest from the rattling windows, smoking a short wooden pipe, and listening, or seeming to listen, to Lorton's little stories of the war, or his other little stories of the sea—sad stories nearly all of them—with a quiet, dreamy look on his face which was very nearly akin to contentment. Nearly akin to the thing—yes; but not the thing itself. He was living in a kind of opium-eater's paradise, though he had not the opium-eater's power to shut out all thoughts of the future. He tried his best to live only for the present moment. Still, the knowledge of what lay beyond would leap at him sometimes like a hungry wolf, and shake him out of his temporary enchantment. But he always drove the ugly horror out of his mind again as quickly as he could. This was the one sunny spot in his shady life, he would say to himself; it was very rough

on him if he could not enjoy it without being troubled by the thought of the shadow, which lay denser and more gloomy than ever ahead of him, beyond the sunlight.

He had written to his mother and told her he was at Leuville, but that he had been unable to find out much about Arthur's married life there—which, under all the circumstances, was perhaps not very astonishing—and asking her to give him a hint in which direction to point his inquiries. He did certainly mean to ask some questions on the subject, sooner or later; but there would always be time for that when there was a break in his morning visits to La Bosquet and his afternoon expeditions out and about with Mrs. Murphy and the boy and nurse.

The picture was going on slowly and execrably. In honest truth, it was a vile attempt, so far as workmanship went, for George was a poor artist; but by a lucky fluke he had succeeded in catching a touch of likeness, and this was enough for the adoring mother. She watched the work with the keenest pleasure, and was almost as interested in the marvellous stories which George invented to catch Artie's attention as she was in the portrait itself, for George discovered a wonderful talent for story-telling during these garden sittings. It tickled his vanity to see the rapt attention on the child's bonny, upturned face as he spun his miraculous yarns, and almost without knowing it he slipped into such a dramatic style of recital that he grew quite astonished at his own powers of imagination.

Mme. la Bosquet—it was by this name he always addressed her; it fitted her better than "Mrs. Murphy," he thought—Mme. la Bosquet would always keep a little behind him when he was working up the climax of these extraordinary stories, as if she was a little ashamed of her interest in the final fate of the fairy prince, or the ultimate triumph of the courageous knight over the bloodthirsty dragon. But George always knew she was listening; he knew the point at which she let her hands fall in her lap, and he knew just the look there was in her eyes as they rested on her little son's immovable face of breathless interest. The foolish, innocent, childish bliss of these moments, when he felt himself one of them, and was contented

to have it so, was a thing quite beyond analyzation, something too dainty for the dissecting knife, too ethereal for examination—a thing which might disappear altogether, like a delicate dream, if inquired into too closely.

It was generally after these moments of absurd exaltation that the thought of the future would fall upon him, like a stone dropped on to his heart; then he would laugh contemptuously at his own “drivelling idiotcy,” and in the next breath call himself a sacrilegious brute for scoffing at the only touch of purity which had ever lifted him above the level of the beasts.

And so the days wore on, and the clouds overhead grew more plethoric every day, and George watched them with a secret anxiety, knowing those idyllic mornings must come to an end at the approach of bad weather. And at last he was awakened one gray daybreak by the patter-patter of rain-drops against his window pane, and realized that there would be no two hours of desultory work and delightful companionship in the arbor on the edge of the cliff, for that day at all events.

All the morning through he stood by the window watching the storm, but by breakfast time he had had enough of this. Wet or dry, he must get out of the house for a time, so he borrowed a workmanlike mackintosh from Lorton’s son, who had a fishing-boat of his own, and started at last to pay that visit to poor old Arthur’s grave, without a probability of being stopped *en route*.

The shutters were all open at La Bosquet—there was no intrusive sunshine to shut out to-day—but there was no sign of anybody in the rooms facing toward the road, and he passed straight on, begrudging even this one morning spent away from his paradise. His mother’s answer to his inquiries might arrive by any post now, and there would be no longer any tangible excuse for his lingering at Leuville—not that he was at all likely to be definitely influenced by such a scruple as that, still there was some foolish shred of support in the idea that it was his mother’s wish as much as his own folly which kept him in his present dangerous position. For by this time he had arrived at that miserable pitch of weakness when one begins to seek excuses for one’s voluntary actions.

As far as La Bosquet the road was sheltered here and there by banks and trees, but when he was once past the house the highway stretched on before him bleak and bare, and exposed to the very summit of the hill, where he could just see the cemetery gates outlined against the driving mist of rain beyond. On this exposed piece of road the storm pounced on him as a cat might pounce on a rat, and made a sport of him. He scarcely remembered being out in such a pandemonium before.

The wind, full from the west, came rushing in from the sea as if hungry for mischief; it beat at and buffeted him, it pelted him with bucketfuls of rain—for the drops were so close that they seemed to run into one another—it shrieked and howled at him, until he was fain to turn his back seawards and wait for a few seconds to recover his breath somewhat.

Once he half made up his mind to go back even now, and leave the cemetery till another day, but he laughed at his own molly-coddling the next moment and bent his broad shoulders to the blast, and held on his way without another pause till he was inside the gates of the graveyard.

Once here, it was not very difficult to find what he had come to seek. He had heard from his mother that a suitable tombstone had been sent over from England to mark Arthur Mirfield's resting-place, and he had scarcely got inside the gates before he saw the fair white marble monolith, raising itself above its lowlier brethren, away in one of the most distant corners of the enclosure.

Those among the other graves which had any distinguishing mark at all were adorned with small crosses of iron or wood, and were further decorated with those huge gruesome wreaths, made of black and violet beads, which give such an abnormal air of gloom to all French burial-places.

George made straight for the distant corner, with the wind and rain at his back now, and read the inscription on the handsome headstone:

“In affectionate memory of Arthur Mirfield, who departed this life July the seventh, eighteen hundred and eighty-seven, in his twenty-sixth year.”

He stood for a few minutes in the driving rain, thinking of the poor fellow who was gone.

He and Arthur had always been good friends, much better friends than he and Mirfield had ever been. Poor old Mirfield had told a lie once—a *sneaking* lie, that was the especial enormity of it—denying his share in some boyish wrong-doing in which they had all three been equally to blame. He and Arthur had borne the brunt without a murmur, but they had neither of them ever quite forgiven the little act of treachery, and they had fallen into the habit afterwards of shutting the elder boy out of their most cherished undertakings, because they felt that he was not to be depended on in a crisis.

George was thinking of this little incident now, as he read the gilt-lettered words announcing his cousin's early death, and as he thought his glance wandered slowly here and there until it fell on a very small grave, at some little distance, on which two or three wreaths of natural flowers, still comparatively fresh, were lying.

There was something so distinctive about these flowers among the multitude of hideous bead ornaments surrounding them, that he went forward with a half-unconscious curiosity to look at the name on the ordinary little wooden head cross.

It bore an English inscription:

“Sacred to the memory of Arthur, the much-loved infant son of Arthur and Mary Mirfield, who died at the early age of nine months, March the fourteenth, eighteen hundred and eighty-six, leaving his parents to bitterly mourn his loss.”

When George had read the inscription through once he glanced round him at the graves nearest him, with their garniture of sad-looking, dripping wreaths; then he lifted his eyes and looked farther afield, at the bare open upland beyond the cemetery boundary, across which the wind was driving the rain in slanting sheets of mist.

There was a look of non-comprehension in this glance around of his, a look which seemed to suggest that he was trying to assure himself of the reality of his surroundings.

It was almost with a spice of reluctance that he brought his wandering glance back at last to the humble little cross at his feet and read the inscription through again.

If Arthur's little son was buried here, who was the child Arthur's wife had taken home to The Fallow?

Then it flashed into his mind, with the rapidity of lightning, that this was what his mother had meant with her mysterious hints against the little heir and his mother. And before this idea was clearly formed it was displaced by a recollection of his own.

He remembered that, when he received his mother's telegram announcing the death of his two cousins, and alluding to "the infant's life" which alone stood between him and the succession, he had imagined she must be speaking of a newly born heir at The Fallow. He remembered now that, when he received that telegram, there had been an impression in his mind that Arthur's boy was dead; but when he heard of the child's arrival with his mother at The Fallow he had not given another thought to the matter, taking it for granted that that idea of his had been a mistake.

And he had been right all the time! And the woman and the brat at The Fallow were rank impostors! And he was the heir-presumptive to the Netley title and revenues! And there was nothing between him and them but the life of one feeble, failing old man!

A fortnight ago the prospect would scarcely have caused him more than a passing thought; to-day it set his pulses bounding, sent the blood surging through his veins, until he grew giddy for a moment and neither saw nor heard anything but a dense blackness before his eyes and a rushing as of great waters in his ears.

But the vertigo passed and left him clear-headed again, and possessed with a desire for violent exertion.

After one more long look at the words on the little cross of wood, to assure himself yet again that his sight had not played him false, he strode from the cemetery and along the cliff road, away from the village.

He was no longer conscious of the fury of the storm, though there was a vague sense of pleasure in his struggle with the wind; the fact of fighting against something was

an untold relief to him. In all his life of excitement he had never felt anything like the whirl of emotion he was in now.

That this chance of respectability and position should have fallen in his way now, just when he had such real need of them, seemed to him something so wonderful that he found himself suddenly believing in the existence of that especial providence upon which the pious people so strongly insist. His heart was full of such unbounded gratitude that the feeling in itself amounted to an act of homage, and but for his terror of cant, and his absolute conviction that this colossal stroke of good fortune was immeasurably above his deserts, he would have given way to some such cry as, "My God, I thank Thee for this good thing Thou hast sent to me." As it was, the thought was in his heart if the words were not on his lips.

He was too wild with excitement to make any plans at present, but there was a general outline in his mind of his future proceedings. He would put matters into the hands of the smartest firm of lawyers in London, he would get everything cut and dried beyond the possibility of overthrow, and then he would give that woman at The Fallow fair warning, and advise her to clear out.

And in the mean time there was little Mme. la Bosquet, in the small house under the dip yonder, close to his hand.

Would she, for the sake of the great love he bore her, consent to overlook that bad, black past of his, and help him to lead a cleaner, sweeter life for the future? At any rate, now he would dare to put it to her. With such an assured future to offer her he might at least try his chance, might do the best he could for himself, unfettered by the thought that he was dragging her down a rung in the social ladder by asking her to link her future with his.

He laughed a little bitterly as he thought of the difference this discovery would make in people's bearing toward him. Folks who for the past five years had passed him by on the *trottoirs* without seeing him would suddenly recover from their temporary touch of blindness when they heard of the imposition that had been practiced on his uncle and its effect on his prospects.

But he had not much thought to devote to this the dark-

est view of the great change that was in store for him; his heart and mind were too much taken up with the brighter side of the picture, with the rainbow-hued hopes which had blossomed out into full beauty, as at the touch of a magician, while he stood by the side of that baby's grave in the wind-swept cemetery on the hill-top.

Hurried along by his eager thoughts, he had walked miles before he recollected to turn back, and the dim daylight was already fading a little by the time he reached La Bosquet on his homeward road.

This time fortune was kinder to him as he passed. Little madame was sitting at one of the windows, writing, and at the sound of his footstep she looked up and uttered a cry of surprise.

The next moment he was at the open window, shaking hands with her and listening, with lips that smiled and eyes that shone, to her pitiful little exclamations of trouble at the condition he was in.

"Imagine your being out at all in such weather," she said in a scandalized voice of surprise; "you must be mad! And of all places in the world to choose the cliff road, in the teeth of such a storm as this. Do come in and let us try to dry you a little."

But this he would not hear of.

He was all of a glow with his walk, he said; he should come to no harm. A few rain-drops would not hurt him; at any rate he could wait until he got to La Belle Esperance. He had been wetter a dozen times in his life.

And all this in a voice and manner so different from his usual quiet, unmoved bearing that she would have been blind not to see the change.

She looked at him as he spoke with a touch of friendly curiosity.

"I think wet weather must agree with you," she said; "it seems to have brightened you up just as it does the trees and flowers." He laughed at that, and a certain suggestiveness in the laugh made her add: "Or is it that some stroke of good fortune has come to you? Perhaps the family business that brought you to Leuville has turned out well?"

"You have hit it!" he cried, laughing again from sheer

boyish lightness of heart and moving a couple of inches further from the window, because the rain was pouring off his mackintosh and making a pool on the polished floor inside. "The business has turned out just splendidly—for me!"

"How glad I am." She brought her hands together with a quick, eager little gesture which expressed her pleasure very fully indeed. "How very, very glad I am."

"Thank you," he said, and perhaps it was the quiet warmth of the tone, or perhaps it was something in his glance, as he stood there in the rain, smiling down at her, that made her suddenly remember that she was showing a vast amount of interest in his affairs.

She blushed a little—a soft, warm pink that just passed across her cheeks and was gone.

"Am I taking rather a liberty in feeling so much interest in your concerns?" she asked, speaking a little quickly in her sudden touch of consciousness. "You must excuse me if I am. Though we have only known one another a few days, counting by time, it seems to me that we are quite old friends. You see, the manner of our introduction opened my heart to you."

"If you could guess what pleasure it gave me to know you took a little interest in my affairs I don't think you would consider it necessary to apologize for it," he answered quietly. And she flashed a smile up at him, and took to fingering the papers on the writing-table by which she was standing. "If nothing else came of this visit to Leuville but this short glimpse of friendship with you," he went on, "I should still look back to it as one of the brightest and happiest periods in my life—a gleam of sunshine athwart a shadowy path. That alone would make the memory of this visit a lasting pleasure to me. But I believe there is more good coming to me from it. I believe that it will change me, in the eyes of the world, from a wandering vagabond into something of a personage. You see before you, Mme. la Bosquet, a young man with excellent prospects."

She laughed at his assumption of importance.

"Excellent prospects of catching a cold, I'm afraid, Mr. Smith."

"Yes, and I shall give you one, too, if I keep you talking near the open window in all this wet," he said, shaking his sleeve free of rivulets before he offered her his hand. "Good-night, sleep well, and dream of all sorts of good luck for me, including a fine day to-morrow for my work. I shall be up punctually at ten, if the weather is any way decent."

Then, as he stood there with her hand in his, a sudden unconquerable longing to speak just one word of the feeling at his heart took hold of him.

"Little madame, do you believe in expiation?" he asked earnestly. "Do you believe one can ever atone for a great wrong done? Do you think a man can ever outlive the effect of a great crime, committed in the heat of his youth? Can one who has ever done such a thing dare to hope for happiness in his after life?"

"I hope so," she answered, and he felt her hand shaking a little as she spoke. "We are taught that if we repent we shall be forgiven."

"Well, God knows I have been sorry enough, if that has anything to do with it," he said solemnly. "If regrets could wipe out the curse of—Mme. la Bosquet, one day, if you will let me, I should like to tell you the whole story of my downfall. From the day of my disgrace until now I have never spoken of the affair to a living soul, but I should like to speak of it to you. I should like you to know the deepest depths of my wrong-doing, and then I should like to ask you if you thought I had sinned beyond forgiveness. I wonder if it would bore you beyond bearing to listen."

"It would not bore me the very least bit in the world," she replied, lifting her eyes, full of sympathy and self-forgetfulness, to his face. "If it would be ever so little of a comfort to you to talk about it, it would be a great pleasure to me to listen. And—Mr. Smith—I am not a religious woman—but—you know how the Bible says you shall be forgiven till seventy times seven. Would such a one as I be likely to think your fault beyond pardon after that, do you think?"

"You are an angel," he said, speaking lightly just because he was feeling so deeply and was afraid of showing it.

"I shall make you redeem that promise before we say 'good-by' to one another. And now I am really off to get into some dry clothes. Good-night."

His heart was very light within him as he went plunging down the hill into the moist obscurity of the village street. He had never had much opinion of himself, and where this especial woman was concerned he was as humble-minded as the hardest of his judges could have desired. And yet he could not help telling himself that that faint touch of consciousness and that sudden tremulousness, when he alluded to his past, were the most hopeful of signs for him.

And until this breath of hope came to him he had never known what a howling wilderness of despair his life had been for these last five years.

He had his dinner-table spread near the fire to-night, and dined by lamplight. He had no sympathy with the dull, sad gray of sea and sky in his present mood. He wanted to be cheery and cosy and warm and bright, and if the small lamp and the smoky fire of green wood were not all they might have been in these respects, his jubilant reflections supplied what was missing with their own radiance.

And so he sat there in the little patch of lamplight near the fire, and forgot all about the bare, empty, stone-flagged room behind him. For he was committing the unheard-of folly of building castles in the air, and these castles invariably took the outward presentment of the old stone house at Netley Fallow, and there was always a small, dainty, rounded figure in a white cotton gown to be seen in some corner of these mental pictures. Now she would be pacing the emerald-hued turf of the ladies' lawn, at the side of the house, under the big beech-tree, arm-in-arm and in deep conversation with a stumpy, broad shouldered fellow, who had brought some trifling worry to her for discussion and advice. Then he would see her running down the broad, shallow, oaken staircase, with a smiling "Good morning" on her lips for the thick-set man who was waiting for her at the foot. Or, again, she would be leaning over a lace-befrilled *berceaunette* in one of the bright upper rooms, worshipping the small pink-faced creature it con-

tained, and declaring, with gay teasing, that the child was almost as ugly as its unfortunate father.

He was still at this ridiculous occupation when the evening post came in, and Monsieur Lorton, finding himself in a dilemma, came in to ask his guest's advice concerning an English letter which had just arrived.

"Although it is addressed to La Belle Esperance it bears the name of an English gentleman who was staying at La Bosquet some time ago," he informed George. "The same gentleman of whose death I told you on the night of your arrival here. See, G. Mir-fee-eeld. The first letter is not the same, still——"

"It's all right," interrupted George, putting his hand out and taking the letter. "That is my name. I am the cousin of that other Englishman. It was business connected with his family that brought me to Leuville. Smith is simply a *nom de guerre*."

"Ah, la, la!" cried the Frenchman, "if I did not suspect something of the sort. Monsieur has not the air of a 'Smeet,' and the blue eyes are very like, too. Oh, very like!"

George smiled to himself as he opened his mother's envelope. He no longer needed any hints from her, he was thinking; he had found out the secret against Mrs. Arthur for himself.

"MY DEAR GEORGE," ran the letter, "I have the most astonishing news for you, or perhaps by this time you have found out for yourself what I am going to tell you—indeed I hardly see how it could be otherwise. I saw Charlotte yesterday, for the first time since Daisy took to her bed, and she told me, what you have no doubt discovered long ago for yourself, that Mrs. Arthur and the boy she calls Arthur's son are not at Harrogate, as everybody believed them to be, but at Leuville. I expect she and you are quite intimate by this time. In such a quiet place you must have met often. She is a small woman, with brown curly hair, pale skin, and bluish-gray eyes—not bad looking, in a certain underbred style, and with a vivacious manner, a way of seeming very interested in the person she is talking to, which the men find very attractive. She has

the boy with her, and an English nurse—of course you will recognize the description. Now, what can have taken her over to Leuville? One would have thought she had had enough of such a place as you describe it to be, during her husband's lifetime. You ask for a hint in which direction to point your questions about the boy. Well, I can only suggest one thing—Is Arthur's little son dead, and are they palming off a strange child on the earl? This should be enough for you. If the child died in Leuville there must be plenty of evidence of the death to be obtained on the spot. Write me soon; I am all impatience to hear of your meeting with this impudent little actress person. That she is carrying on some intrigue I am absolutely certain, and, independently of the enormous benefit which must accrue to you from her exposure, it would give me the very greatest pleasure to show her up to the earl, who has chosen to pet her and the boy from the moment of their arrival at The Fallow. Perhaps even yet I may live to see you where I have so often pictured you—at the head of your own dinner-table at Netley Fallow. It is always the one dearest wish of

“Your devoted mother,

“ALICE MIRFIELD.”

It was not yet eight o'clock when the letter arrived, and at ten, when M. Lorton came to ask if his guest had any more orders for the night, for they were early people at Leuville, George was still sitting with his hands in his pockets, looking thoughtfully at the smoke-browned rafters over his head, with the letter lying open on the table before him.

He rose at Lorton's entrance, bid him “Good-night,” crushed the letter into his pocket, and marched off, lamp in hand, to his own room.

But once there, and the door safely locked, he sat down on the edge of his narrow bed, thrust his hands into his pockets again, and resumed his study of the overhead architecture of the Normandy inn.

He sat there so long and so immovably that the silence grew creepy at last. His face, never very fresh-looking at the best of times, was utterly colorless in the sallow lamp-

light, and his mouth, never a handsome mouth under any circumstances, grew very hard and grim as the long, quiet hours passed by and the night wore slowly on toward morning. He would probably have sat there until the servant with his pails of sea-water roused him at seven o'clock, but his lamp burned out between four and five, and, brought back to the present by its noisy spluttering, he bethought him to throw himself back on his pillows just as he was.

And here, unable in the darkness to continue that absorbed examination of the rafters, he dropped off into a heavy sleep, and woke up owlsh and stupid, wondering dully why he had gone to bed in his clothes, at the rattle of the salt-water cans outside his door in the morning.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAN WITHOUT INTENTIONS.

As soon as his memory came back to him, his first impression was one of surprise that he should have slept. It was preposterous for a man who had so much to think of to waste time in sleep.

When he was half-way through with his dressing he searched for his mother's letter, and smoothed it out of its creases, on the top of his tiny washing-stand, and read it through from beginning to end, and then laughed at himself for his pains.

As if his overnight conviction needed verifying! As if there was room for the smallest atom of doubt as to the individuality of "the small woman with brown curly hair and bluish-gray eyes!"

Very well, then, if his mind was so thoroughly made up on the question of identity, what did he mean to do? Did he mean to communicate with that abnormally acute firm of lawyers and denounce this "impudent little actress person" for the impostor she was?

No, damn it! he would not take to calling her names, not even to himself. He would have knocked down another man for doing it, and it was simply a bit of black-

guardism to take advantage of the fact that he could not perform that operation on himself.

And yet, whether he gave her the name or not, was she not the thing itself? Let him be as generous-minded as he chose, could that alter the hard, unassailable fact?

Arthur's little son lay buried in the cemetery on the hill-top. He understood all about those fresh flowers now. By the date on the headstone there could not possibly be more than six months between the birth of the dead baby boy and this other one, who had taken his name and place, therefore they could not be brothers. Then, if Mrs. Arthur Mirfield had substituted another child for her own, and passed him off upon Lord Netley as his grandson, what was she better than an impostor?

A little burlesque actress at The Camel and Howdah Theatre, that was what she had been! A young person who showed her pretty rounded limbs and spoke rhymed lines of varying metre without a glance in the direction of their possible meaning or punctuation, at a salary of thirty shillings or, at the outside, two guineas a week, utterly uneducated, light-hearted, and exceedingly attractive, he knew the type well enough!

And now, here she was ringing the changes on her father-in-law, substituting some stranger's youngster for her own dead child, in order to retain the enviable position of the mother of Lord Netley's heir!

A bad lot all through, apparently—a baggage from start to finish—and yet for him she was the one woman in all the world, the one being who had ever roused in him a passion which had some touch of soul in it—an emotion which might still continue to exist apart from all question of gratification whatever, a love which had some touch of holiness in it to temper and redeem its grosser part.

Until now he had never devoted a thought to the probable virtue or frailty of his various loves—now all this was changed—and though he tried to persuade himself that it did not matter, it hurt him horribly to find her so much less than he had thought her.

Then his mood shifted round again, and he began to scoff and gird at himself for his sudden squeamishness. Who was he that he should be dainty? Of all people on

God's earth surely he was the last to be nice in matters of honor and honesty!

But in this case he was nice, and nothing could alter it.

As for making up his mind as to his course of action, that was altogether beyond him; luckily there was no hurry, things would not hurt for being left as they were for a time. The actual condition of affairs was in no way changed by this discovery of his. He would wait and see how matters shaped themselves.

And then, as the sun shone and he had a mad longing on him to see her again, he packed up his box of pastels and trudged away up the hill, and walked straight round to the arbor in the garden behind La Bosquet, and found her there waiting for him.

There was something odd about this meeting with her under changed conditions. He had almost imagined, as he came along, that he should discern some alteration in her appearance, some sign of secretiveness, some furtive touch of caution in her manner. But she was just the dainty, bright, sympathetic creature she had always been; perhaps there was even an added warmth in her greeting this morning, due to his last night's indirect appeal for comfort.

It was a relief to him to see no visible sign of a cloven hoof peeping from under the hem of her delicate clean white gown. She was not as perfect as he had thought her, but she was just as sweet, as winning, and lovable as ever, and there was an end of all argument.

He told her he had found out who she was, though he still kept his own personality hidden.

"Do you know, I think I have found a veritable mare's nest," he said, in one of the pauses of the conversation. He was shading the background of the portrait, and went steadily on with the mechanical work as he spoke. "I heard last night from a friend of mine who is staying at Cramlingford in Yorkshire, and hearing I was here she wrote to ask me if I had seen anything of Arthur Mirfield's widow. You see, I knew a man of that name very well some time back, knew all the family in fact, and she thought I should be interested in meeting the poor old fellow's widow. To speak the truth," he went on, conscious of her startled air and quickened breathing, "I had almost

forgotten he had left a widow—one's friends drop through so completely when they get married."

He stopped speaking and went on methodically with his work, and after a slight pause, as of indecision, she gave a nervous little laugh and took the bull by the horns.

"You have found me out," she said; "it is no mare's nest. I am Mrs. Mirfield. I knew you would find out, sooner or later, the mistake you had fallen into about the name, but it was not a matter of importance. Where is your friend staying at Cramlingford?"

"With Mrs. George Mirfield, at The Lodge."

"Ah! then I will venture upon a little piece of second sight and tell you that I know what was in your letter. Mrs. George Mirfield does not like me, and her friends would think as she does. Your correspondent told you I was a designing young woman of the adventuress type—impudent, ill-bred, and unscrupulous."

George glanced up from his work with a quiet smile, and she laughed aloud and went on without a trace of temper:

"You see, I know exactly how Mrs. George Mirfield talks about me, and, to speak the truth, I brought most of it on myself. She was naturally indignant that a person with such antecedents as mine—I suppose your friend told you about my antecedents?—should be received with open arms by my husband's people at The Fallow. She has a great notion of keeping people in their place, you know—Mrs. George Mirfield I mean—and she tried to keep me in mine."

"And what sort of a job did she make of it?" asked George, with a whimsical look, as if he rather enjoyed the situation.

"Well, it didn't turn out quite a success. I was really very impertinent to her. I was sorry afterward; I ought to have made more allowance for her. She has had a great deal of trouble with her only son, and trouble does sour one's temper so much; but, you see, she worked me up into an awful temper too, and you can't be answerable for what you say in a temper—at least I can't. I am an awful vixen when I am roused. Lady Mirfield—do you know Lady Mirfield?—she says I am a born warrior, but really

I never want to fight unless I am attacked first. So long as people are civil to me I never feel the smallest desire to be abusive; it is retaliation that is so sweet to me. Do you know Lady Mirfield?

"I knew her before her marriage. I have not seen much of her since. I knew her husband very well, and I knew yours even better—a right down good fellow he was. I had a great liking for Arthur Mirfield."

She made no answer, only took up her work and began to be very busy, and George wondered a little. Was the sense of loss still so fresh, or was it that she was anxious to avoid all allusions to her own past?

It was curious how impossible he found it, when in her presence, to remember anything against her. He knew her to be a swindling impostor, who was doing her best to cheat him out of his inheritance, and yet, sitting there with her, listening to her clear, bright voice, watching the flash of her speaking glances and the play of her expressive mouth, he could think of nothing except that his life would be one long aching void without her. If her backslidings had been twenty times as heinous as they were he would still have loved her.

He dropped speaking of her husband when he found she had no liking for the subject, and passed on to the other members of the family—to Lord Netley, Abney Garth, and Lady Mirfield. And here at last she roused up, and was responsive even to enthusiasm.

"She has been like a sister to me. I went into the house a stranger, of whom she knew nothing but harm, or at any rate nothing good, and she treated me as if I were a daughter returning to my own home. And you must remember, too, that my boy was almost certain to put her little one into the background, and still she received us like that. She is an angel, Mr. Smith, or at least she is certainly as nearly an angel as one can be on this side of the grave. She is the sweetest—the most unselfish woman this world holds."

"She is certainly a fine creature," George admitted, turning a little away from his easel with an evident inclination for a talk. "Did you ever hear about that adventure of hers down in Wales the winter before she was married? I

always had an idea that she and Mirfield would never have brought things to a climax but for that business. He was a poetical, romantic sort of fellow, you know, and I think he was just carried out of himself by admiration for her splendid pluck, and proposed under the influence of the moment. I don't believe he was ever a bit spooney on her—I never did—and she simply worshipped him. Queer, wasn't it? She is the sort of woman some men would sell their souls for."

Mrs. Mirfield let her hands fall on her lap and turned her head to look seaward, where one or two brown sails were gleaming in the sunlight, redly, against the keen blue of the horizon.

"One can never understand these things," she said pitifully, with a world of sudden pain in her eyes. "She never talks about her married life. I think it hurts her too much. I don't like to speak of it either; it seems like a disloyalty to her. Tell me about that other affair—that adventure you spoke of. What was it she did that was so wonderful?"

"She stayed the livelong night out on the mountain-side, in a heavy snow-storm, with a man who had been knocked senseless in the hunting-field—stuck to him, when she might have ridden home and saved herself, because she thought he would be buried under the snow and lost for days if she left him."

Mrs. Mirfield drew a long, quivering breath.

"It was a brave thing to do," she said gently, still looking away out to sea, with that odd, wistful look in her eyes.

"Well, yes, it was rather plucky," observed George dryly, feeling a little surprised at her sudden want of appreciation; "but I expect you have heard all about it before?"

"Something of it—yes. Was the man young? I wonder he did not want to marry her."

"Oh, he was the father of a grown-up family himself—a tenant of her brother-in-law. I've forgotten the name, but I remember the family, because she told me about some of them coming to thank her for what she had done for their father."

"How they must have felt toward her!" said she again,

and now her eyes were shining with feeling as she looked round at him. "I can enter into something of that, because I, too, feel that I owe her a debt of gratitude which I can never pay. They must have felt that they could lay down their lives for her—I should have! But, then, Lady Mirfield says I am a maniac on the subject of gratitude. As if one *could* be too grateful!"

"Well, I don't know," he answered with a meaning smile. "I think you are rather given to over-estimating little services, judging by my own experience."

"Of course I know what you mean," she confessed, with a slight shake of her head; "but I don't see how anybody could over-estimate such a service as that—the preservation of a life dear to you. Why, it is impossible to put what one feels about such a thing into words. I never think of that day but my heart beats at the memory, till it sets me trembling. Look at my hand now, and judge for yourself what the feeling must be that can set your nerves and muscles vibrating like that."

He took hold of the shaking hand she held out to him across the little rustic table—he had not been prodigal of his handshakes during their ten days' acquaintance, held back, perhaps, by some feeling that familiarity from him was not the due of a pure-minded woman, by some misgiving that, if she had known all there was to know about him, she might have been more chary of her friendship. But now she seemed no longer so completely beyond his reach as she had been—his discovery of a flaw in her rectitude had brought them just a little more nearly to the same level—and the thought that it was so was oddly compounded of pleasure and pain.

"You are such an impressionable little woman," he said, "so easily influenced by your emotions. Do you know that if I wanted to ask ever so small a favor of you I should hesitate, because I should be afraid you would feel bound to grant it, whether you wished to or not, from some ridiculous notion of gratitude."

"I hope you would not hesitate to ask anything of me," she exclaimed eagerly; "if you want to give me a very great pleasure you will show me something I can do for you. Of myself, of course, I could do nothing, but Lord

Netley is a person of some influence, and he would do a great deal for the man who saved his——”

“Ah, don’t, please!” interrupted George, laughing inwardly at the complications he was causing by the maintenance of his incognito. “It was nothing of that kind I meant. In fact I don’t think I had any real meaning in my mind when I spoke.”

“I half hoped you had,” she answered, with a touch of disappointment. “I hoped that perhaps I might be able to help you in some little way with the business you spoke of last night.”

He laughed aloud this time; the irony of the situation was too much for him.

“Have you such an inveterate objection to a sense of obligation, Mme. la Bosquet?” he asked, with a touch of something in his manner which she could not understand. Was it only amusement, or was it some deeper feeling?

“Not with you,” she said quietly; “I don’t mind feeling under an obligation to you. I should not like it with some people. It was not that that made me anxious to help—I only wished to help forward your business here——”

“Ah! Now I have you!” he observed, still with that baffling manner, half joking, half earnest. “You are anxious to get me out of Leuville.”

A bright, hot flush flashed into her face at the bantering accusation, and he realized how near to the truth he had unintentionally gone.

“You are taking my nonsense seriously,” he said, picking up his crayons and beginning to work in the shading at one of the top corners of his picture. He had enough liking for his own work not to go too near to the portrait while he was in his present heedless frame of mind.

Why had he annoyed her with that preposterous remark? What was the good of his knowing what he knew if he did not use the knowledge to her advantage, by avoiding all allusions to the truth?

“I am a clumsy fool,” he went on, when she did not speak. “When I try to make a joke I always put my foot in it. Though, perhaps, it was hardly all a joke after all,” he added; “the thought that you were anxious to rid yourself of my company touched me in a vital part—my conceit.”

She looked up at him with a rather wistful smile.

"We are acting like a couple of children," she said. "Your society has been a very great pleasure to me here, and you know it without my telling you. And I know that you have been glad to come up here of a morning to wile away the time. Why should we make a mystery of our pleasant mutual liking, like a foolish boy and girl in love with one another? All the same, now that your business here has been brought to a successful conclusion, you will naturally be leaving. This is not the sort of place a man could put up with, except for some special purpose."

"But I don't think I told you that my business was quite concluded, did I?" he asked. "I have received some fresh news on the subject since I stood talking to you in the rain last night. I am not so near the settlement of the matter as I believed. Don't say you are sorry I'm not going directly, even if you mean it. I am fool enough to be glad of anything that gives me an excuse for staying near you a little longer."

It was farther than he had ever gone before. He saw a faint trouble in her face, but whether it was due to his change of tone or to the fact of his lengthened stay in the neighborhood of her dangerous secret he could not tell. Now that she knew he was acquainted with the Mirfield family she would see the peril there was for her in his presence at Leuville. He wished he could reassure her on this point; but any allusion would alarm more than reassure her. Nothing could be so comforting to her as the belief that he was in perfect ignorance on the subject, and likely to remain so. He had almost made up his mind to leave the question entirely alone, when a sudden idea came to him.

"In my friend's letter last night," he said, after a somewhat long pause, during which they had both of them kept their fingers busily occupied, "she told me that your husband is buried here, Mrs. Mirfield, and as an old friend I suppose I ought to take a look at his grave; but I have such an inveterate dislike for burial-grounds—and for French ones in particular—that I am going to shirk the duty altogether. I hope you won't think me very wanting in proper feeling?"

It gave him a queer feeling to see how she took his slyly administered comfort. She shot one radiant glance at him and then bent her pale face low down over her work, as if she was afraid of betraying herself.

He wanted to take her into his arms straight-away and tell her that he knew everything, but that he would not use his knowledge to her detriment. He had never known such a desire to play the part of comforter in all his days. What must she endure, he asked himself pitifully, haunted continually by the fear that her trickery would be found out?

"I should be more likely to think you wanting in proper feeling," she said, speaking with her face still bent over her work, "if you went unwillingly to your friend's grave. It would be a poor kind of respect to show to the dead to visit them with a feeling of repugnance at your heart." She was quiet a moment or two, then she began again: "That is one thing I like so much about you—you are outspoken in your likes and dislikes. I don't believe you would do as many do who think themselves quite conscientious people—play fast and loose with your conscience for expediency's sake."

"Conscience?" he repeated, with a touch of amusement. "Bless you, I have no conscience! I threw it overboard with my respectability years ago. I am a bad lot all through, Mrs. Mirfield. If you knew half how bad, I doubt if you would ever have had anything to say to me. You spoke just now of gaining Lord Netley's influence on my behalf—do you know, if you once made him understand who I was, he would be haughtily indignant at my daring to push myself upon your notice at all."

"You so often speak of yourself like that," she said, letting him see that she was sorry. "I wonder if there really is any cause for your depreciation of yourself, or whether——"

"Wait until you hear!" he interrupted, breaking into her sentence heedlessly. "I'm putting off telling you my charming little story because I'm afraid, when you hear it, you will do as all my other friends have done, give me the cut direct, and I'm egregious ass enough to care about your friendship—an ass, because it's just folly to let your-

self get to care for a thing that you know you can only enjoy for a time."

"But you shall enjoy it always!" she cried, opening her eyes wide at him, with a delightful touch of indignation. "Do you think I should allow anything you had done years ago—you said it was years ago—when you were a foolish, thoughtless lad, to influence me against you now? And there is another consideration to be taken into account. This dreadful thing that you have done—is it really as dreadful as you and your world choose to think? You see I know, of my personal experience, how cruel it is to be judged by appearances. Were you so judged?"

She looked at him with a kindly little air of scrutiny, and, when he only screwed up his lips in the manner of a person who has really nothing to say for himself, she shook her head and told him she chose to believe in him until she was able to judge of his wrong-doing for herself.

And somehow this attitude of hers set him off wondering if he had done her a wrong in judging her by appearances. What if there was some explanation of affairs after all which would leave her free from the taint of fraud?

He could not see how it could be so, and yet he was no longer so certain of her guilt as he had been. He might set her down as a rank impostor again later on—how could he do otherwise in the face of all the facts?—but just at that moment he was able to throw all mistrust from him.

"I do not make friendships easily, Mr. Smith," she added, "but I make them to last, and I warn you that I don't mean to break my rule in your case."

"Not even to oblige Lord Netley?"

"Not even to oblige Lord Netley," she replied, sitting very upright and looking at him steadily. "If he really were to say anything against you I should put my hand over his lips and say, 'If your own gratitude won't keep you from running this man down, you must still leave off slandering him in my presence; he is my friend; when you insult my friend you insult me, and I have yet to learn that Lord Netley is capable of insulting a woman.'"

He looked at her admiringly. It was the first touch of dramatic instinct he had seen in her, and it became her

admirably. In an instant the question suggested itself to him: Would she go back to the stage if she ever had to leave Netley Fallow?

"You are very stanch!" he said quietly. "Perhaps if I had had a few people to stand by me like that, when I made my first muddle of things, they might have held me back a bit."

"I wish you would not speak so hopelessly of yourself," she cried, with sorrowful impatience. "You always talk as if your life was over and done with. It is simply awful, at your age."

He smiled, and shrugged his shoulders very slightly, and began to pack up his paraphernalia.

"We won't talk about it at all," he said. "I'm not so indifferent about it all as I used to be, and it makes me doleful, and I'm sure it cannot be a pleasant topic for you. Don't you think the face looks more lifelike now I've got the shading in? It throws up the flesh tints a little. Two more mornings and I shan't have a ghost of an excuse for inflicting my society upon you any more."

"I am sorry," she said candidly. "It has been very pleasant. But I am expecting my recall daily now. Shall you have to stay much longer in Leuville, do you think? It will be very desolate."

"I don't know yet what I shall do. You know I told you before that I was a man who never had intentions, or formed plans. I shall just see what turns up, and drift with the current. It is the only thing I've got enough pluck for—to let things severely alone."

She gave him another of those wistful looks.

"I wish I was your sister," she said.

"Do you? I don't," he answered her, laughingly. "I'm almost sure I like you better as you are."

He made no suggestion for an afternoon trip that day, and she wondered a little at the omission.

All the afternoon through he sat in the sunshine, on the end of the sea wall, where he had seen the three peasant women swinging their legs on the evening of his arrival. He smoked prodigiously, and if there had been anybody to notice him they would have come to the conclusion that he was thinking deeply, but he would have denied the im-

putation. He had thought enough last night to last him for the rest of his life. He had done with serious thought so far as this subject was concerned. What was the good of bothering? Things were much better as they were. If he had been a shade more sure of himself, if he could have believed that his sudden liking for quietness and peace was likely to last, he might have seen a way out of this ghastly muddle; but as it was, things were best left as they were.

He could do her a good turn this way; the other way he might bring unending trouble on her, just as he had done on everybody else who had ever cared a rap for him.

Things should drift their own way.

Perhaps it was his determination to leave things alone which prompted him to take his mother's crumpled letter from his pocket and tear it into tiny shreds, and toss them broadcast over the incoming tide, where the wind caught them and bore them fluttering far out to sea, like so many messages of truce and good-will to the world at large.

Perhaps it was his determination to leave things alone which prompted him to write a short letter to his mother that night, in which he informed her that he had made Mrs. Arthur Mirfield's acquaintance, but had not come across any evidence of the child's death in Leuville. Perhaps! As he himself said, it did not need much pluck to leave things alone; at any rate it was the only course he had energy enough for. He had been a lazy, skulking, purposeless vagabond for a good many years now, why should he alter his life all in a minute, and bring no end of bother and bustle on himself?

Why, indeed!

CHAPTER XIV.

GEORGE MIRFIELD TELLS HIS STORY.

NOBODY but himself knew how George garnered up and made much of every moment of the last few mornings he was to spend in the little garden enclosure behind La Bosquet.

The sweetness of his intercourse with this little woman

and her boy was intensified by the knowledge that it was passing away from him with every minute, just as the love of a lifetime seems concentrated into the passionate tenderness of a deathbed parting.

In all the time to come, be it short or long, he would always look back to these sunny days at Leuville as a dream of bliss and purity and light—something to be shut up in his heart of hearts, to be kept sacred from the jesting comment of his acquaintances. At the thought of such a one as Barnstaple making light of his love passages with the “fetching little widow he met in Normandy,” his hands doubled up instinctively, and his mouth looked dangerous.

He laughed grimly, though, at the notion of that precious worthy’s astonishment if he could have seen the life his comrade was leading just now. How those seared, bloodshot eyes would open at the spectacle of George Mirfield seated in a creeper-grown arbor, with a soft-voiced little lady in a white cotton gown at work with her needle by his side, and a curly-haired youngster playing horses on the grass before them. And he had to acknowledge that the major’s astonishment would be justifiable, for it was a fact that he had himself scarcely ceased to wonder at his own unusual meek and mild serenity.

It was all very peaceful and idyllic, with the clematis boughs swinging to and fro above his head, in the clear bright summer sunshine, and the plash of the waves on the beach below making a sleepy murmur in the air around them, and forming a pleasant accompaniment to little madame’s sweet, gay laughter and the boy’s shouts of merriment; but still it was extraordinary how completely he had ceased to hanker after those other sounds—the smooth roll of the roulette ball, the cry of the croupier, the insidious trail of his rake as he drew in the bank’s winnings. It seemed something of a miracle to George. He had never had a chance before of finding out how sick he was of the sordid, grinding monotony of the gambling hells, and it appeared to him that this change in his feelings, this delight in fresh air and wholesome companionship, had some touch of the marvellous in it.

Once or twice he recalled Mme. Koek-koek’s little lectures, and smiled as he thought how she would applaud her

own insight if she could have seen him now, and seen the enjoyment he got out of his present innocent life. Perhaps some day, when the memory of this fortnight in Leuville had grown to be nothing more than a dream, of which the joys and sorrows were alike dimmed by distance, he might tell the kind-hearted *danseuse* something of his taste of pure happiness—perhaps. But not yet. It would be some time before he would be able to discuss the little episode with the necessary show of easy unconcern—perhaps quite a long time.

And meanwhile he arrived at his last morning at La Bosquet.

Going up as usual at ten o'clock, to make a pretence of adding finishing touches to the boy's portrait—which was already as "finished" as George's indifferent art could make it—he was met by madame with the news of their departure on the following day.

The moment she heard him talking to Artie she came toward him from the house, and before she spoke he guessed at something disastrous by the added touch of pallor to the usual clear, transparent purity of her skin.

"I have heard from home," she said. "My recall has arrived. We leave to-morrow."

He took her hand and made a little grimace.

"You might have broken the news more gradually," he murmured, with an air of mock tragedy. "Suppose I had swooned at your feet."

Nevertheless, in spite of his would-be joke, she saw her own pallor reflected in his face, and hastened her speech as if she were afraid of silence.

"Lady Mirfield's little girl is well enough to be moved to the sea for a few weeks, and the south wing is being purified and fumigated, and Lord Netley sends word that he wants us at home badly, so of course we are off at once."

"Of course," he repeated, and, stopping there, she hurried on again, as if the welfare of the universe depended on her keeping the conversation going.

There was not much in what she said. She chattered on about the details of the journey, and so forth, but if there was nothing very satisfying in the bald discussion of such things as changes from one line to another, and the

hours of arrival and departure, it served to prevent any show of self-consciousness.

And George was saying to himself that this was a wretched waste of time on their last morning together, and yet had enough sense left to acknowledge the wisdom of it. He kept on telling himself that if he could only get through the morning and make his adieux on this commonplace footing it would be a cause for congratulation, and yet his heart was hungering to speak.

It was one of those close, stifling days at the end of summer, when, even on a cliff top overhanging the sea, there seems to be hardly a breath of air; and by-and-by there came an ominous shadow over the sun and a dead stillness in the atmosphere which seemed like the forerunner of a heavy storm.

But George held on with his work, and refused to take warning.

What were storms to him in face of the fact that this was in all probability the last time they two would ever sit side by side? Was it likely he would throw up one of those thrice precious minutes for fear of the biggest drenching in the world?

And so it happened that, when the storm broke in a sudden fury right over their heads, they had to make a rush for the house, she with the portrait held carefully face downwards, and he with the scared child in his arms.

Artie did not like the thunder and lightning. He was hardly frightened, but it evidently awed him a good deal, and he was content to sit quiet and still in his mother's arms, and watch the storm over the sea, without putting a whole string of questions, as was his usual habit when anything he did not understand was going on.

And there presently he fell asleep, worn out perhaps by the langourous heat of the day, and left those other two absolutely alone.

It was the first time in their fortnight's acquaintance that they had found themselves *tête-à-tête* inside a house. Out in the open their intercourse had been singularly free from ceremony, but being indoors seemed to bring a sense of conventionality and restraint with it.

George went round the room, looking at the pictures on

the walls and the ornaments on the mantelpiece, and making would-be funny remarks on their oddities when the crashing thunder allowed him to be heard. He made them last as long as he possibly could, and fetched up at last by the closed window, in the other side of which she sat, in the shadow, with the boy's bright head pillowed on her breast.

The thunder was less continuous than it had been, though the rain still plashed in sheets against the window. She felt a silence coming, and grew talkative again, returning to the subject of their home-going and to Lord Netley's anxiety about the boy.

"You see he is his grandfather's only hope," she said; and he returned interrogatively,—

"You mean in the matter of the succession?"

"Yes: he is the next heir."

"But surely not the only one?" said George, yielding, before he was aware of it, to a sudden temptation to hear something of himself from her. "Isn't there a man—a nephew, or something of the sort in the family?"

"You mean Mrs. George Mirfield's son," she replied, with a shade of hesitation in her manner. "Of course he would inherit if anything happened to Artie; but Lord Netley dislikes him so much, that I believe he would die of annoyance if he thought he would reign at The Fallow after him."

"Poor chap!" observed George, with a touch of easy contempt. "What has he done to earn his lordship's dislike, Mrs. Mirfield?"

"I don't know the rights of the story," she said, "and sometimes, when I see how bitter Lord Netley can be toward people he doesn't like, I fancy that perhaps he is a little hard on this reprobate nephew of his."

"What an adorable little woman you are!" cried George, with a sudden fervor which sent the startled color into her cheeks. "You always take the part of the publicans and sinners. You shall hear the story of George Mirfield's backsliding, and judge for yourself."

"Do you know the story?" she asked, lifting her lips from kissing her little son's head, and looking at him with a suddenly aroused interest. "Do you know him—George Mirfield?"

"I knew him at the time he ran amuck," he told her, with a short laugh, "but I don't think I know him now. He is another chap altogether to the fellow I knew. I was in the same regiment with him when that deplorable affair happened, and I knew as much about it as most folks. Will you hear the story? It will kill a minute or two, till this rain slows off a little."

"I should like to hear it very much indeed," she said, and her eyes said it even more emphatically than her words. They were full of that warm interest in other folks' troubles which is as different from impertinent curiosity as sunlight is from shadow. It was sympathy, not inquisitiveness, which prompted the desire to know the story of George Mirfield's youthful mistake.

"He was only twenty-two when it happened," began George, resting his eyes on the pretty, attentive face in the shadowy corner, and mindful, under all the thoughts which this recalling of the past brought rushing into his memory, that this was probably the last time she would look at him in that frank, open way. "Only twenty-two, scarcely more than a boy, and he had a boy's full share of liking for a pretty face."

A heavy peal of thunder came echoing in from over the sea, and he waited quietly, leaning his shoulder against the window frame, until the roar and rattle had died away before he went on.

"It was the daughter of the senior troop sergeant he came to grief over—a man who was thought very highly of in the regiment. As for the girl, she was the pet of us all. She had belonged to the —th hussars since her birth, and they were very proud of her. One of the most kitten-like faces you could imagine, little madame—innocently naughty, if you can understand such a paradox—and as uncertain and fascinating in its constant changes as an April morning.

"Sergeant Melton worshipped her—his only child, so you will be able to enter into his feelings—and he guarded her as the proverbial apple of his eye. But, to use another proverb, love laughs at locksmiths, and I don't suppose there was ever a girl yet who couldn't hoodwink her father and mother if her heart was hard enough set on it. At

any rate Jenny Melton did. She used to contrive imaginary visits to her aunts, and so forth, who lived in the town a mile away from the barracks, and during these visits she and Mirfield invariably managed to meet somehow.

"I give you my word, Mrs. Mirfield, that at the start they neither of them meant more harm than a couple of babes; but the poor girl's vanity was a little touched perhaps at having an admirer among the officers, and it is just possible that she took his love-making more seriously than he meant it at the first go-off; not that I want to excuse the boy; she had a pretty face and caressing little ways, and he was as hot-headed as the rest of his kind; and the end of it was that harm did come of it, and the knowledge burst upon George like a bombshell.

"I was in his quarters one night, smoking and talking, when his man came and said Sergeant Melton was outside, would he see him?

"Well, with all his faults, Mirfield was never the fellow to shirk the consequences of his own actions, and he saw the man; though he guessed there was a pretty bad time before him.

"But his expectations came nowhere near the thing itself."

George paused a moment, as if the memory of that interview still stirred him so profoundly as to make him shrink from the task of discussing it.

"You see," he said, resuming in a lower key and speaking more slowly, as if the words came reluctantly, in obedience to a strong effort of will, "you see, Mrs. Mirfield, it wouldn't have been half so bad if poor Melton had blustered a bit; but he didn't, never spoke angrily nor raised his voice once. He just stood inside the door of the room, as straight and steady as if he was on parade, with his face as colorless as death, and a look in his eyes like a drowning dog's, and told us what he had just found out.

"The girl's mother had heard something, and had tackled the poor little soul, and she had owned up to the whole thing.

"'I don't expect any redress,' Melton said, in the quiet, heart-broken way he used all through; 'my girl has made her bed, and she's got to lie on it. I only came here be-

cause I felt as if my heart would burst if I didn't talk of my trouble to somebody, and it seemed to me you were the proper man to be burdened with me. And yet, with all my trouble, I wouldn't change places with you, Mr. Mirfield. You've broken the hearts of three people, and mark my words, you'll find those broken hearts the biggest load that even you ever had to lift—I was the champion weight-lifter of the regiment,—‘the biggest load you ever had to carry in your life, and one that you won't get rid of for many a weary year to come.’”

Molly drew a quick little breath at the involuntary self-betrayal, but said nothing; indeed she was scarcely surprised. He went on, too absorbed in his recital by now to be conscious that he had let out his secret, or to care about it if he had been.

“There was something about the poor fellow's quiet way of telling his trouble that made one just ache with pity for him. It got at Mirfield fairly. He was clean off his head with sorrow, or remorse, or something of the kind, and he jumped up from his chair, and pitched his pipe against the opposite wall, and put his hand out across the table toward the man by the door.

“‘May I smoke that pipe again,’ he said, pointing to the shattered fragments, ‘if I don't marry your girl, Melton!’”

Little Mrs. Mirfield pressed her sleeping boy close up against her breast, hugged him to her in a quick little rush of emotion which made her eyes dewy and her voice unsteady.

“Oh, I am glad!” she cried tremulously, “oh, how glad I am! He could not do more—no man could.”

“No, I don't think they could,” agreed George, “and poor Melton thought the same. He came away from the door, and they gripped hands, and Mirfield looked him straight in the eye and said, ‘I'll do it, Melton, by God, I will!’”

“Well, the whole business was arranged on the spot. Mrs. Melton was to take the girl up to London the next morning and get lodgings, and George was to apply for a week's leave, and the marriage was to take place the moment the necessary formalities could be gone through. There's

no doubt he would have lived to repent the impulse if it had ever been acted on, but all the same the impulse was a good one. It's as well to insist on that, for it was the only good thing about the whole business.

"Now comes the bad part of the story.

"Melton had been gone about an hour, and Mirfield was just turning in, when he heard a bustle and fuss in the barrack square. He was feeling very peaceful and contented with himself—sunning himself in the rays of his own virtue, so to speak—and when he opened the window to find out what the row was about there was quite a touch of the Pharisee about him. Some poor devil was playing the fool no doubt, he thought, as he leaned out.

"There was a full moon, and in the clear light he saw people running to and fro on the far side of the enclosure, near the married non-com.'s quarters; and nearer, coming straight toward his window, there was one man, in his shirt and trousers, running as if for his life. It was Melton, and when he recognized him Mirfield leaned far out and asked what was wrong.

"Then Melton lifted his face up in the light of the moon, and Mirfield was frightened at it. He looked mad, downright mad.

"‘She is dead,’ he whispered, ‘Jenny is dead! I was too hard on her before I came round to you to-night, and she took it to heart too much, and she has poisoned herself. She is lying on her bed over yonder, stiff and stark, and you would have made an honest woman of her! It's me that's killed her, me that loved her better than anything in earth or heaven.’

"He turned, and ran like an arrow, across the square and out of the gate. The sentry never thought of stopping him; he'd heard of the trouble, and thought he was off for another doctor. In the morning his body was found, tied by the heels, among the reeds in the river."

"Oh, poor things! poor things!" cried Molly. The tears were running unheeded down her face now, and the sobs were coming in quick gasps from between her quivering lips. "How terrible, how dreadful for everybody! and most of all for that poor boy! Oh, I don't wonder at anything he has done since. It was enough to break his heart.

His remorse must have almost driven him mad. It was worse for him than for anybody!"

"I'm glad you can see that," said George—he spoke a little huskily, as if telling the story had put a strain upon him—"very glad! Nobody else ever saw it, Mrs. Mirfield, nobody else ever thought of pitying him. The outside world had nothing but blame for him—blame of the bitterest, the most unqualified kind—and he went down under it.

"What he went through at the time was bad enough in itself; but when everybody began to drop him, it grew more than he could stand. It broke him. He had a mad fit of drinking, and then the colonel sent for him and advised him to exchange."

"And did he exchange?"

"No; he cut the army altogether. Threw up his commission, ran away to the Continent, to get out of the way of everybody who knew him, and went headlong to ruin—drink, gambling, bad company, riotous living of all kinds. He never pulled up till he found himself at the end of his tether—without a penny to bless himself with but what his mother allows him out of her private income. He's looked upon as a pretty queer lot now. Respectable people find it convenient to forget him when they are unlucky enough to meet him face to face; and the worst point in the whole business is that he is getting so used to it now that he don't care a hang about it. And so he goes on from bad to worse, only held back from the last plunge of all by the thought of his mother.

"It's wonderful, isn't it, Mrs. Mirfield," he broke off, with a sudden abrupt change of manner, lifting himself as it were out of the dim valley of the past on to the level ground of the present again—"it is really wonderful how a mother will cling to her progeny, after all the rest of the world has grown sick of them and their misdoings. Whatever that little chap in your arms may do in the time to come, it's wonderful to think that he will never be able to shake your love for him."

She held the boy close to her, as if so she would guard him from all the unknown perils that lay before him.

"It would not be love if it did not survive evil report," she said softly. Her cheeks were still wet, he could see

the tears from where he stood, and the thought that they had been shed for him was, to his withered heart, as dew in the desert to the thirsty traveller. "Evil-doing may quench liking, esteem, respect, even friendship, but not love. It is one of God's most merciful decrees that love, pure and simple, is not influenced by the judgment; if it were, the wrong-doers would be badly off indeed."

"It is a blessed doctrine!" murmured George, and stood quiet for a little, watching the play of the distant lightning over the slaty waters, and the plashing of the raindrops in the puddles under the window.

He looked round presently to make some remark that should ease the burdensome silence, and found her eyes fixed in tenderest compassion on his face.

"I was going to say," he began, and stopped suddenly, held by her earnestness. And so they waited a second or two, with their gaze on one another, as if they were each reading the other's very soul.

And then a tender little sound broke from her, just such a sound as she might have made at sight of some bad hurt of her little son's, and she put her left hand out across the sleeping boy in a sudden unrestrainable impulse of sympathy.

"Oh, please let me say it!" she whispered, her face alight with feeling; "and don't think that because I know I shall think worse of you than I have done. In all my life I was never so sorry for anybody as I am for you! If I thought a word from me would have any weight with you I should say, "Start again, and live it down! Do something good and noble that shall help to bring back your lost self-respect, and life will look a different thing to you. Leave off trying to forget the past, but try to balance the trouble you have brought about by doing somebody some good. You would ease your heart that way. I know. I have tried it."

He bent his head and raised her eager, clinging little fingers to his lips.

"God bless you!" he said gently. "You are a good, kind little woman. I'm glad you know. As for making amends, I've gone past the time when that was possible. There is nothing left for me but to make a finish of it as

quickly as I can, and as quietly. Good-by! Tell my mother the best story you can about me—she is sure to ask a multitude of questions—and if ever you give a thought in my direction, be as merciful in your judgment as circumstances will allow of. And, for your own comfort, I would have you always remember that this little glimpse of friendship with you has been like an oasis in the barrenness of my life, like food to the starving, drink to the parched, sight to the blind—like everything that is typical of the satisfying of a terrible want. The memory of this fortnight will always be with me, to assure me that I am not the mere brute I thought myself, and that knowledge alone is a solace to a man who has gone as deep in the mire as I have.”

He pulled himself up short and dropped her hand, and picked up his hat from the small table behind him.

“And now I’m off!” he said, with a short, hard laugh. “I’m getting sentimental, and that leads on to spooneyism; so I’ll get away before I grow objectionable. I leave for Paris to-night. Kiss the little lad for me when he wakes up. *Bon voyage, Madame la Bosquet!*”

And he strode across the room and shut the door behind him before she could put her remonstrance into words.

Another second or two and the rattle of the latch of the garden gate informed her that he really had gone, without protection of any kind, out into that drenching rain.

She put her cheek down on her boy’s curls, and felt, for the first time since her widowhood, that her love for her child did not fill her whole heart as it had done. George Mirfield’s departure had left a blank in her life she had not been conscious of before.

But even this disquieting discovery faded into the background presently before the significance of another.

In the first rush of warm, generous pity for his broken life she had forgotten herself and her own welfare entirely; but now, as she sat alone in the silence of the house, with the hissing rain and the distant thunder accentuating her solitude, it stole into her mind bit by bit how George Mirfield’s presence in Leuville could mean nothing but peril for her and her boy, could mean nothing less than the overthrow of her present standing at Netley Fallow.

It was palpable to her, sharpened as her wits were by the knowledge of her own dangerous position, that George Mirfield could have had but one motive for his visit to Leuville—the burrowing into that past which she was so anxious to leave undisturbed.

She remembered many things now.

She remembered what he had said in the early days of their acquaintance—it was the afternoon he found her on the hill-top, with Artie asleep at her side—and she recalled, with that odd mingling of the insignificant with the important which occurs in moments of the gravest thought, that it was then she discovered, in the brilliant afternoon sunshine, that the irregularity of his features was redeemed by the beauty of his dark-blue eyes—she recalled how he had told her that he was at Leuville on business, family business too, for his mother.

There was only one explanation possible of this business. Mrs. George Mirfield could have only one object in sending her son to Leuville; to satisfy her doubts on the subject of the birth of Lord Netley's heir.

If George had been sent expressly to hunt out the truth concerning Arthur's little son, he certainly had hunted it out. There was nothing to prevent his finding out all he wanted to know within five minutes of his arrival at Leuville.

The memory of his allusion to Arthur's grave, his declaration that he did not intend to enter the cemetery at all, seen by this new light, became suddenly suspicious to her.

He had said it to soothe her fears; and that meant that he knew what good reason she had to fear his visit to the cemetery—meant, in short, that he already knew all the cemetery could tell him.

He had already been to the cemetery and seen the graves there!

The thought set her shaking like an ague fit.

Was all her elaborate planning and scheming to go for naught after all? Was the Netley household, now so happy and contented, to be shaken to its very centre by the discovery of the shame and dishonor it had cherished in its very midst? Was all her sad, troublous past to be

raked up for the edification of the curious and the idle, for the mortifying of Lord Netley, for the grieved surprise of Charlotte?

Could she doubt it?

Remembering that George Mirfield had been sent here by his mother, remembering that mother's thinly veiled antagonism toward her since the first hour of their acquaintance, remembering what, on the very surface of things, the discovery of the truth would mean for George himself, could she doubt that immediate exposure lay ahead of her?

This was the gravest danger which had threatened her house of cards, and it found her defenceless and at the mercy of her assailants.

When Artie awoke, refreshed and merry after his comfortable sleep, he found his mother unaccountably dull and stupid, and tried to explain the mystery away after his usual childish fashion.

"Has you got a headache?" he asked in grave concern, and when she confessed she had not he looked still more perplexed than before.

All the afternoon through he kept an intermittent watch on his mother, as if her unusual preoccupation fascinated him. He would stop suddenly in his games and run up to her, and plant his elbows on her knee, and, resting his chin in his chubby hands, gaze up into her face with a preternatural gravity, which looked like a reflection of her own, and ask her some extraordinary question, which showed how much his baby mind was exercised on the subject of her silence.

And during all those afternoon hours her thoughts never ceased to busy themselves with the future immediately in front of her. But there was always one ray of comfort glimmering at her through the gloom. Whatever happened, they could not take her boy from her.

And, apart from the stern realities of the situation, there was another view of matters which hurt and harried her in her tenderest part. She was disappointed in her friend. A dozen times she told herself that all the shame and disgrace she saw ahead would have been far less hard to put up with, if it had been brought about by anybody but just this one man. It fretted her to think that while

he had seemed so frank and honest in his friendship, he had been secretly working against her and her boy.

Was all the world false and sly? she asked of herself, with a sorrowful sigh. Was there no trusting any one at all?

As the day drew on toward its close her feeling of worry and oncoming trouble deepened.

Amelia was busy with the packing for the early start tomorrow, so Molly undressed Artie and put him to bed herself, doing it some time before the usual hour, because he should be fresh for the morning.

The child was very gentle and loving to her during this performance; he seemed to know she was in trouble, and did his best to make things cheery for her.

"Is you sorry 'cos we're going away?" he asked, when he was in bed, giving her his good-night kiss. "Is Mr. Smeet coming, too, muvver? I wish he was. I wish I could ask him to come. Won't you go and ask him for me, muvver? He always does what you ask him. Won't you ask him, muvver?"

The baby prattle put a sudden mad idea into her head.

"He always did as she asked him!" Was it any sort of use to make a personal appeal to him? Was it any good to ask him to hold his hand for a time, to stay operations at least until Lord Netley's death? He could lose nothing by that, and it would give her a little time to prepare a way before her. Perhaps, though, he had already sent his mother the full particulars of her conspiracy.

Her heart almost stopped beating at the thought. What a reception was waiting her at the Fallow if he had! It was more than she dare face unprepared. She must see him at all hazards before he left Leuville, and find out exactly what she had to expect.

She gave her little one another hug and settled him in his small bed.

"If Artie is very good, and goes to sleep directly," she said, "I will go down to the village and see if Mr. Smith will do what I ask of him."

And she turned at once, and put on her hat and cloak, and went off down the hill road, on each side of which there was a noisy little rill trickling, the only evidence the morning storm had left behind.

CHAPTER XV.

“A SWEET CUP SUBTLY SEASONED WITH SORROW.”

THE sunset that night was of a kind to make the most unobservant hold his breath in wondering admiration.

Clustered round the spot on the horizon where the flaming giant had slipped out of sight, were a few small, purple, fire-edged clouds. Above them, and on either side, the whole western half of the sky was one unbroken sheet of pulsating crimson light, the radiance and brilliance of which no words could describe, no verbal account could convey the faintest impression.

The beach at Leuville faced full west, and to-night the tide was out, and the ribbed sands near up to the street, and the ribbed rocks farther out, and the stretch of fretting waters beyond that again, were barred irregularly with alternate stripes and patches of light and shade, vivid rose-red wherever the slopes faced westward, and darkest, densest slaty shadow on the sides facing toward the shore.

The extraordinary beauty of the display drew George out, almost against his will. As a matter of fact he ought to have been packing the few things he had with him—that was, if he really meant to catch that night’s train to the south. But it did not really matter much—that is to say, it did not matter so long as he kept himself out of sight of Mme. la Bosquet. He was not going to put her to the plague of another emotional interview if he knew it. He threw his hat on when he was barely half through his dinner, and he stepped out through the window of the squalid *salle-à-manger*, where he had dreamed those intoxicating dreams three nights ago, and walked away in a straight line for the distant edge of the tide.

What fishing industry there was at Leuville had its headquarters at the lower end of the village street, where there was a crazy little landing-stage, and where a little river had scooped out for itself a channel in the sand, deep enough to allow the fishing-boats to get alongside the jetty at all states of the tide.

So George had the beach all to himself this evening, and the solitude and the magnificence of the night drew him on and on toward the sea, till the houses behind him looked like toys, across the wide stretch of level, lonely shore. He had never once glanced behind him as he walked. What attention he had to spare from his own dull misery was given to the splendor before him. It was not till he reached the edge of the water that he glanced round at the cold gloom at his back; and then, very greatly to his astonishment, he saw a figure, in a light-colored, fluttering garment, moving in the half-distance between him and the irregular line of the village houses.

At first he could not make out in which direction the figure was moving, and it was only when it came between him and a black rock that he discovered it was coming toward him. Almost at the same moment some peculiarity in the carriage of the shoulders and head set his heart beating with a vague sense of anticipation, and he involuntarily started forward to meet the advancing woman.

As they drew nearer one another on that lonely expanse, which was neither sea nor land, with the crimson glory of the departing day all about them, he saw that she lessened her hurry and speed, and came toward him slowly and more slowly, until at last she stood still at the spot where the sand gave place finally to the rocks, and waited his approach. And in her face he read as he drew near what she had come there for.

"Have you, too, come to say good-by to the Leuville sunsets?" he asked, as he came within speaking distance, treating it as quite an every-day affair that she should come at that hour, and alone, to that desolate spot; and asking himself as he spoke how he could spare her the ordeal she had set herself.

At that moment his chief feeling was rage with himself for having allowed her to guess at his identity. Why could he not have told the story, if he must tell it at all, without any allusion to the name of the redoubtable hero? Now that she had had time to think matters over, she had of course come to the conclusion that he was at Leuville for no other purpose than to put an end to her pleasant life at Netley.

"It has been nearly the grandest sunset I've ever seen," he was saying meanwhile. "I suppose we are going to have another spell of fine weather now the storm has come and gone; the pity of it is that we shan't be here to enjoy it."

"Yes, it is a pity," she answered, but with such palpable absence of manner that it gave him the opening he wanted.

"You are worrying about something," he said quietly, "and I think I can make a guess at what it is. Look here, little madame, here is a rock without any wet seaweed: sit down and rest a minute or two—not longer, because the tide will race us for our lives up to the sea-wall if we overstay our time. You have been hurrying too much, and it has set you shaking a little."

She sat where he told her, and lifted her pleading eyes to his in a wordless appeal. He had never seen that look of entreaty in them before, and it hurt him to see it now.

"I don't believe you came down to see the sunset at all," he said, turning his face away because he did not want to see the relief in hers, for fear it might be too much for his self-command. "I believe you came across these nasty wet sands on purpose to ask me something—now, just wait and let me finish—you are still breathless with your hurry, and I've got breath enough for both, so we will make use of it. I think you got a ridiculous idea in your head—after you found out my real name—an idea that my mother's son could not be here, in Leuville, without meaning mischief to you. Well"—he paused and looked round him at the fading crimson of sea and sky, and drew a deep breath, like a man who takes a big plunge—"well, please understand that it is a ridiculous idea, and there's an end of it."

As she listened all sign of agitation and flurry left her at a touch. Her surprise held her still and silent, watching his profile incredulously, as if she found it hard to believe she had heard aright, until he said again:

"You understand?"

"No," she cried, "no; I don't understand! I—I can't! It is impossible you could still mean to stand my friend if you knew all there is to know here—in Leuville."

"But I do," he assured her. "Why will you insist upon details that will only distress you? I know everything

there is to know—have known for the last week—ever since the evening I stood in the rain outside the window talking to you. Don't you remember what a state of jubilation I was in that night about the improvement in my prospects! That was before I knew that to accept this good-luck meant no end of trouble for you. When I found that out things looked very different. I didn't care so much about it when I knew it could only be gained at your expense, and so I have decided to leave things as they are."

"You—threw up—such—a future as that—out of—friendship for me?"

She had risen in her great astonishment and moved to the front of him, and stood with her hands pressed close across her breast, her wide-open, disbelieving eyes fixed upon his.

"Oh, come," he remonstrated, with an uncomfortable little laugh, "don't let us get tragic over it! You know what a purposeless, lazy sort of brute I am. It is simply a question of consulting my own ease. When I go away from here I shall just forget everything connected with the place, except the delightful hours I've spent with you and the small heir of Netley. No allusion to any other incident of my visit will ever pass my lips. And now, I think, we had better be moving toward home."

But this last suggestion she did not seem to hear.

"It is not possible," she gasped, still standing in that attitude of strained self-repression, still watching his resolute face, with that wondering doubt in her own. "Why should you make this sacrifice for me?"

"Fudge about sacrifice!" he answered curtly. "Where is the sacrifice of giving up a life that I am no more fitted for than you are fitted to drive a plough? Do I look the sort of man for a seat in the House of Lords? Do I look the sort of man who would enjoy being made president of all the local agricultural shows? The sort of man to entertain all the heavy respectability of the county? The sort of man to live a life that should be a decent example to my humbler neighbors for miles round—do I, now?"

In her eyes just then he looked like a man who could do anything, however good or great, a veritable hero, but he did not give her the chance to say so.

"What sacrifice can there be in giving up a life that would be one continual round of distasteful tasks? Sacrifice indeed! As I said before, fudge, my dear Mme. la Bosquet—fudge, all of it! That sunny-haired youngster of yours will make a far more satisfactory lord of the manor than I should, so come along."

She moved a few steps on the homeward way, and then paused again. The *brusquerie* of his bearing she was scarcely conscious of; her mind was too taken up with the action itself to trouble about the manner of it.

"I wish it was possible to offer you some explanation," she began, before they had gone a dozen yards, stopping suddenly to face him in her earnestness. "I don't like accepting this unheard-of sacrifice without letting—— The fact is," she broke off, making a fresh beginning, as if she found the other too dangerous, "the fact is, I can't bear you to think badly of me; this awful deceit of mine must seem——"

"Never mind about that," he interrupted, speaking so roughly that she shrank a little at last, and when he saw the movement he put his hand out with a sudden radical change of bearing. "Nothing that you did would seem wrong in my eyes," he said gently. "I may as well say it; perhaps it will help to reassure you, and it can't possibly do any harm, since we are scarcely likely to come across each other again during the term of our natural lives. Things have gone so far with me, little madame, that if I found you were the most hardened criminal in the world, I should not be able to utter a word of blame. My reason has run amuck where you are concerned, and my love has taken my judgment captive. Never trouble yourself with the idea that I condemn you. I have only the one feeling for you, and it overpowers all the rest."

She showed none of the ordinary signs of consciousness, only turned and walked on again, wringing her hands under her cloak.

"This makes it harder than ever," she said presently, in—a half-strangled voice—"makes it so much harder for me to accept your unparalleled generosity. To think that I have not only come in between you and your inheritance, but have robbed you of your peace of mind too!"

"No, that you have not done!" he declared promptly. "You can't rob a man of what he hasn't got. If you have made any change in me, it is for the better—remember that! Even with the want of you always in my heart, I am more at rest since I have known you than I have ever been. If you have done nothing else for me, you have given me something to think of besides the eternal chances of the gaming-table."

"If I could only explain," she said again, when they had gone some distance in silence, harping, woman-like, on her wish to stand well in his eyes.

"But I don't want you to explain," he answered, with a tender little laugh. "Let me think evil of you if I can; it may help to cure me of my folly. What good could explanations do, you know?"

"No, that's true," she muttered, as much to herself as to him; "it would not do any good."

"Then why worry yourself," he said; "no good can come of that either. It would be a great trouble to me to think I had brought worry into your life. I shall wish my tongue had been cut out before I let you know who I am, if you are going to fret yourself about it." They were close up under the sea-wall, and when he took her hand to help her up the steps to the road he held it for a little. "Promise me you won't let the memory of me trouble you," he said.

"How can I promise you that?" she asked sorrowfully. "I can promise to try. Do you know what is my greatest regret, as I stand here saying good-by to you? That, because of this dreadful life of deceit of mine, I dare not offer you a word of good advice. It would seem like the grossest presumption, from a woman who is living such a life, to do the patronizing to a man who is capable of such unselfishness as yours, and yet——"

"Well? Go on. Say to me just what you would say if you were as immaculate as an angel from Heaven."

"It is the gambling," she said, low and troubled, flushing, but keeping her sad eyes on his face.

"You want me to give it up? Would it make you happier in your memory of me if I swore never to play again?"

She did not say anything, but she brought her other hand

up and laid it above his, with a gentle pressure which sent a glow all through him.

"Then I swear it!" he cried gayly, but with his eyes full of purpose and resolution. "And now, little madame, go home, and be happy. I can watch you up the hill from here, and if you make haste I shall just have time to see you wave your handkerchief from the garden before I start to catch my train. Good-by."

She could not gainsay this dismissal, and with a low, passionate "May God bless you as you deserve to be blessed, George Mirfield!" she turned and walked away up the hill, in the still clear light of the afterglow.

And George sat on the end of the wall and watched her, with his hat pushed to the back of his head and his hands in his pockets.

Now that she was no longer there to see it, there was a positively ravenous look in his eyes as they followed the fluttering of the pale gray dust-cloak up the steep road, and the hands in his pockets were clenched till the nails nearly cut into the palms. He was going through a good deal in letting her go from him like this, but there was plenty of endurance about him, and if it is neither a great nor a brilliant quality, it still has its good points.

While he sat there he heard the weak-chested tooter-a-too on the horn which announced the arrival of the evening post from the next village, and he saw the figure on the hillside pause a moment, as it came level with the little mail-cart, and then go on again.

Another minute and he got the signal he was waiting for from the slope on the edge of the cliff, and, answering it, he crossed the road to pack his bag and make a start.

The sooner it was all over now, and left behind forever, the better, he was saying to himself. He still had no plans nor intentions of any kind. It was only a kind of brute instinct which was urging him to get away from the place where he had been so nearly happy, where every stone and blade of grass was pregnant with the memory of "the might have been."

While he was settling his bill with M. Lorton in the hall the postman came up and delivered a letter for him.

He saw it was from his mother, and decided that it

would keep until he was safely off on his journey. But as he stood there waiting for his change, he broke the envelope and began twisting the letter to and fro, and while so occupied two names in close juxtaposition caught his glance.

He unfolded the letter and read a line or two. Then he turned back to the beginning and walked outside the door, and started to read it properly by the fading twilight; and yet, when he had gone right through it, the only part which remained in his mind was the passage he had first read: "In spite of what you say, I am certain there is something wrong with Mrs. Arthur. Is it possible, do you think, that she and the child both belong to Abney Garth? Has he substituted them for the real people? They have always been suspiciously intimate, and he has made himself conspicuous by his championship of her on any and every occasion."

As he stands there in the quiet little village street, listening to the lessening tooter-a-too of the departing postman, such a fierce gust of passion as he has not felt for years seizes hold on him. He makes up his mind on the spot that this guess of his mother's is the real solution of the mystery. Behind him, through the open door, he hears Lorton inquiring his whereabouts. But though the words strike on his ear they do not reach his understanding, though, to speak strictly, just now it is doubtful if he has an understanding at all; for it is being whirled round and round, along with the rest of his intangible entity, in the whirlwind of his emotion, till there is no sense left in him.

His love for this Molly de Courcy, or Mrs. Arthur Mirfield, or *madame l'amie de Monsieur Garth*, or whatever she chooses to call herself, would stand any attack but just this one. All his masculinity rises up in swift, hot, mad revolt against this assault on its most vital part. He could forgive her anything, everything, except that she should—during all the time she had been so gentle and sweet to him—have belonged to another man.

Is it for Abney Garth's child that she has played on his forbearance? In any other way she might have hoodwinked him and he could have overlooked it; it is just this

one falseness that has the power to set his heart and brain on fire—that she should have let him love her while she belonged to another.

He has correctly described his own mental attitude toward her; “his reason has run amuck where she is concerned,” otherwise he would see the crass injustice of this last accusation. But he does not; he sees nothing, knows nothing, in his sudden, mad, unreasoning jealousy, except that his love has been played with by this woman for her own ends; and the injury is of a kind that calls aloud for instant retribution, that pants and yearns to avenge itself.

Before he is conscious of having formed any intention in the matter he is hurrying up the hill, as if his life depended on the speed he makes.

By the time he reaches La Bosquet he is “scant of breath and wild of mien,” and the old Frenchwoman who comes to the door at his hasty summons looks half scared as he puts his inquiry.

“But, no,” she tells him, madame is not yet returned.”

He begins a passionate accusation of falsehood, but checks himself before she has grasped his meaning.

“Is she—Molly—still in the garden behind the house?”

In spite of the years of misery he has gone through in the time, it is scarcely ten minutes since she waved her signal of safety to him. Perhaps she is still there, laughing quietly to herself to think how completely she has subjugated him, and telling herself what a capital story it will make to tell to her lover in one of their stolen interviews.

He turns abruptly from the open doorway as if to return the way he came, but he goes round the house instead, and strides across the grass toward the arbor, aflame from head to foot with resentment. And then, in one brief instant, in the flash of an eyelid, as instantaneously as it was born, his anger dies—dies as dead as a door-nail.

Somebody inside the arbor is weeping with a passion and *abandon* that is almost terrifying, and a choking, yearning voice says, in labored gasps: “George!—my hero!—my king of men!—my love!—this is my punishment!”

There follows a sound as of somebody throwing their head forward into their hands, and a burst of stifled sobs,

and then the whisper begins again, "How shall I bear it, how?"

"Why bear it at all, little woman?" asks George, coming round to the front of the arbor, and gathering the prostrate figure up in his long, strong arms, and holding it in a pressure which threatens immediate strangulation.

Molly shrinks away terrified for a brief instant, and then makes no further remonstrance, simply lets herself rest in his embrace, with a submission which has a touch of exhaustion in it—rests there, sobbing like a tired-out child.

"Why bear it at all, Molly?" he whispers again, loosening his hold a little, and finding one of her hands and carrying it up to his lips, and then laying it against his cheek, as if the mere touch of her flesh was a joy to him. "I didn't dream it was like this with you, my sweetheart," he goes on presently; "you showed no sign of it down there on the sands just now; I thought all your trouble was for me. Even now, Molly, I can hardly believe it, it seems so queer that you should care like that for me—queer, but bewilderingly beautiful. And to think how nearly I was going away without knowing it! Good God, what an escape! I couldn't ask you to love me, you see, Molly, because I'd got such a hold on you. I was so desperately afraid you would say you cared for me whether you did or not, and it would have been such a vile use to make of my knowledge. All the same, I'm going to accept your love, now you have given it to me unasked, and we will be as happy or as miserable together as God meant us to be when he made us. Aren't you just a little afraid of throwing in your lot with such a bad 'un all through as I've been, darling?"

At the direct question she rouses herself to answer, and lifts her white face from his shoulder.

"Not afraid of that," she says, "never of that, George. I would trust myself to you to the end of the world. And yet it can never be, dear, never."

"Why not?"

She does not answer; only shakes her head and lays it against his shoulder again, as if the question were beyond all argument.

"But, my darling, that is stuff and rubbish," he ex-

claimed, all his stronger nature up in arms against this placid resignation. "If we care for one another so much—you do care for me, Molly—I heard you confess as much just now, and women don't humbug themselves about such things when they are alone. You do care?"

She raises her head again, and through the gloom he can see her eyes looking at him, straight and steady. It is an odd freak of thought that, meeting that still gaze of hers, his mind should suddenly leap back to that other time when she had looked at him in just that same way, with her eyes wide-fixed, her dainty throat stiffening itself haughtily. Then she had been rehearsing, for his benefit, her rebuke to Lord Netley if he persisted in attacking her friend, and George had said to himself that it was a pretty piece of acting. What if this time it should be also "acting"?

The question flashes into his mind unsought by him; the insinuation in his mother's letter is bearing fruit.

"You do care, Molly?" he repeats hungrily.

"Care?" she echoes. "I don't believe a woman ever cared so much in this world before. I know I'm giving myself away to say such a thing as that; but what does it matter, when we are saying such a long good-by as ours is likely to be? You see," she adds, with a new little quiver creeping into her voice, "you aren't likely to have the chance to twit me with my boldness, and so I may as well say all I mean. I love you, George; I love you with all the love that my woman's heart is capable of—a love that is like wine to the water of my girlhood's fancy; a love that frightens me with its fierce strength. You believe me?"

He catches her upturned face between his shaking hands, and kisses her eyes, her lips, her brow, her throat, with eager, devouring kisses, which tell her what her answer is to him. The wave of passion quite carries him away for the moment, and she puts up her hands in startled entreaty.

"George," she whispers, "let me go; you frighten me," and the appeal steadies him.

He pushes her a little from him, and goes out of the arbor, over to the very edge of the cliff, and stands there, still and silent, till she calls him gently by name.

He comes back at the first sound of her voice, and would put his arm round her again, but she won't have it so.

"No; such indulgences as those are for happy lovers," she says sadly, "not for you and me, dear. It is written in the book of fate that we—for our sins, perhaps, George—are to love and live apart, so we won't make our parting harder than we can help."

He puts out his hand, as she stands in front of him, and lays it on her shoulder; in his present mood he feels he must touch her.

"You said that before," he says. "If we love one another, what shall come between us?" His voice is a little husky, but he is keeping himself well in hand. "No power on earth shall keep me apart from you if you will take me."

It is very hard for her. In her agitation she gropes about with quivering, twitching fingers on either side—an instinctive seeking for support, perhaps—and when her hand comes in contact with something she plucks and worries at it, unconscious that it is a thorny bush, or that it is lacerating her finger-tips most cruelly. The torn, crushed foliage sends an exquisite fragrance out on the night air. She does not smell it then, not to know of it; but in all her life to come the smell of a sweet-brier bush in the twilight will recall the anguish of that moment to her, and the look on his face as he listens to her ultimatum.

"It is just what I should have expected you to say," she tells him. "It is of a piece with all I know of you. O George, what a man you would have made if fate had been less cruel to you! I wonder why God arranges these things so? If it is true that he chastens those he loves, he must love you, dearest, for his hand has been very heavy on you. And the chastisement is not over yet, and I am the unhappy creature who has been chosen to add another stroke to your bitter scourging. George, this thing can never, never be, dear, while other things remain as they are now. As far as I can see, it seems to me that under no circumstances whatever can we hope to be anything to one another. There is something in my past that raises a barrier between me and happy love, and I believe from my soul that that barrier will never cease to exist."

The hand on her shoulder tightens its pressure.

"Tell me one thing," he mutters—that foul suspicion will writhe itself into his thoughts again in spite of him; he must crush the hateful thing—"just one thing, Molly, my dear, and I will promise not to ask another question. I'm pretty well used to buffets by this time, and I suppose I can bear this one as well as the rest, but I want to know just one thing."

He had meant to mention Garth by name, but when he comes to the point he finds it difficult and alters the form of his question.

"I want you to assure me that this barrier, which you say is to separate us for ever, is not—tell me that it is not your duty to any other living man that comes between us."

"You mean—I don't quite understand."

"I mean that, in confessing your love for me, you are not breaking faith with another man."

"Ah, no! a thousand times no! I never encouraged but one sweetheart before—until now, George, and that was your cousin, the man I married."

"Thank God for that!" he said solemnly. "I'm not going to ask any promise from you about the future, little woman—just be as happy as you can, and if you can forget me altogether so much the better for you—but I am glad to know that this fortnight has been mine, that these last few moments are mine, to know that there is no thought of any other man dividing your heart with me. What a queer thing it has been, hasn't it, Molly, our meeting one another like this? But it will be queerer still by-and-bye, when it is all past and there is only the memory of it left—'A tale that is told! A dream that is past!' That is how it will seem to me. But it is a dream that will always be a joy to recall—'A sweet cup subtly seasoned with sorrow,' as somebody says. I never saw the meaning of the line before; I do now."

They stand quite still for a little while. He has both her hands in one of his now—later on he will find the stains from her bleeding fingers in his palm, and wonder how they came there—and the other is still on her shoulder.

The big September moon is beginning to throw a yel-

low light on the tops of the trees. The two people standing there in that curious stillness are in the shadow as yet, but there is enough diffused light for them to see each other's faces, and they look at one another with a greedy heart-hunger in their eyes as if they were trying to take a picture, each of the other, that shall last them all their lives.

"You are sure," says George, scarce breaking the silence with a whisper, "quite sure, Molly, my dear, that there is no hope for us—quite sure that this obstacle cannot be overcome?"

"Quite, quite sure!" she answers, with a quivering sigh, and they fall back into silence again.

They know the last moment has come, but they don't know how to face it.

They can each feel the other's pulse beating tempestuously under their fingers, each hear the other's breathing, coming in quick, irregular, sobbing gasps, and their eyes never lose that hungry hold of each other.

Presently, from inside the house, they hear Amelia trying to ask of the old French *bonne* if her mistress has not yet returned.

"*Madame, nay parse ee-cee?*" she asks, raising her voice to a shout in her desire to make herself understood.

They do not hear the reply, but George murmurs, "I must go!" and still stays on.

The arbor is between them and the house; they are scarcely two yards from the edge of the cliff. The tide is coming up quickly now, and they hear the hoarse break of each wave and the succeeding splash as it dashes itself against the foot of the rock.

"Molly," whispers George again, "Molly, my love! my own!"

He draws her gently to him, his face bends forward toward hers, his arm is round her, the rustle of her quick-coming breath is on his mustache.

With a swift, sudden impulse she, too, leans forward and kissed him—once, twice, with quick, passionate tenderness—and then she twists out of his arms and moves away a foot or two.

"Now go," she says tremulously. "Go at once, while

we can bear it. No, don't touch me again, George, and don't even come near me. You see how near I am to the edge; one hasty move on your part or mine and I should go over. Don't attempt any more farewells. Go!"

He looks at her face (she is in the moonlight now), and he can see every shade of expression in it, and he realizes how "near she is to the edge."

"Go!" she says again. "Be considerate up to the very end, and go!"

And he turns and goes.

When his footstep has died away she steals softly and stealthily across the grass and round the house, after him, meaning to take a last look at him as he swings down the hill, but she stops just before she reaches the gate.

He is leaning face downward on it, and she hears one or two groans that sound like the protest of some poor dumb brute in mortal agony.

She crouches behind a bush and waits, with a look in her eyes like a hare when the dog is close upon her; this is almost more than she can bear.

And then, in the moment of her greatest extremity, some one is heard unfastening the house door, and the broad figure at the gate straightens itself by instinct, passes out to the road, and walks off down the hill, without a pause or glance behind—straight on, out of sight, into the darkness and silence of the valley below.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NEW TRAIL.

ABNEY GARTH came to London to meet Mrs. Arthur and escort her back to Netley Fallow.

Lady Mirfield and Daisy were to remain at Southport for a month yet, he told her, and Lord Netlev was eager for her return.

"The house without ladies or children was like a long drawn-out funeral," he said.

They broke the journey by a night in town, and during

the evening they had plenty to discuss of what had gone on during her absence, both at the Fallow and at Leuville.

When Garth first heard of George Mirfield's presence in the little Normandy fishing-village he looked thoroughly startled, but he grew reassured after a time.

Molly had her own secret to keep on this matter.

If Abney knew how much George Mirfield had found out he would certainly want to know *why he had held his hand!* And since she had no intention of enlightening him on this point she must also keep him in the dark on the other.

So Garth formed the impression that George's visit to Leuville was a matter of a day or two only; that he had lounged about the place in his usual aimless fashion, had introduced himself to Molly, and made that convenient little speech about his distaste for burial-grounds, and gone away again without finding out anything that they wished to keep hidden.

"It was a narrow squeak," he said, when he had heard all that Molly meant to tell him; "but the most uncomfortable part of the business to me is that Mrs. George should have thought it worth while to send him on the expedition. She must have got some idea in her head to have thought of such a thing. I wonder now what she imagined she was going to do when she started that reprobate of her grubbing about in your past."

But Molly did not care to pursue the subject.

For one thing it was hateful to her to hear George run down in that calmly superior manner of Abney's. It was natural that two men of such utterly different dispositions should not be able to make allowances for each other, but that fact scarcely made the respectable man's patronizing allusion to the prodigal's failings more endurable to listen to; and perhaps Abney's air of forbearance made it all the harder.

"Has the journey tried you very much?" Garth asked her, with his observant eyes examining her keenly, "or perhaps it was the associations of the place? Your change has certainly not made you look very robust."

"It is only the fatigue of the journey," she assured him, and he wondered rather why his remark should have set the color coming and going in her cheeks. "We had to leave

Leuville very early. I could not depend upon Amelia nor Manon to get us up in time, and I had no sleep to speak of in consequence."

A fact true enough in itself, though falsely premised.

There was no doubt about Lord Netley's pleasure over her return. He rose from his chair almost briskly to meet her, and made her and the boy sit quite close to his elbow while they talked over her stay abroad.

Molly looked a little better than she had looked yesterday, and Artie was simply radiant with health and spirits; and under these circumstances the old man was fain to forgive her for what he called her "foreign freak."

But Mrs. George Mirfield did not let her off so easily.

She came strolling up after dinner, with a woollen shawl thrown over her head, and caught Molly alone in the small inner drawing-room, in the midst of a letter to Charlotte.

At the first sound of her voice Molly's heart sank into her shoes.

Outwardly they had been sufficiently good friends for quite a long time past, but Molly's eyes had been pretty well opened to Mrs. Mirfield's real feelings toward her now. She would not have sent her son to poke and pry about Leuville unless she still doubted Molly's *bona fides* in some way.

"So you have got back at last," she said, shaking hands and settling herself exactly opposite Molly at the writing-table.

Molly had turned the table round so that the light from over the mantelpiece should fall across her shoulder, and in doing so had built herself into a corner. When Mrs. Mirfield planted herself opposite her in that decisive manner it must be confessed she felt rather hemmed in.

"Quite a long stay you had in that little French place. I wonder you didn't get sick of it and take a run on to Paris."

"It would take me a long time to get sick of Leuville," Molly answered gently; "you forget how full of associations the place is for me."

She despised herself as she spoke. What a habit of prevarication she was falling into, of mixing up falsehood

with truth, until she hardly knew herself when she was lying!

"Well, yes, I suppose that does make a difference," Mrs. Mirfield admitted, "though it must really be a positive hole, according to my son's account of it."

"I dare say it would be dull to a person accustomed to the gayeties of Paris," Molly replied equably, beginning to tidy the pen-tray as she spoke.

"Oh, it must have been horribly dull! I can't think how he could have resigned himself to remaining there a fortnight." This with a slight touch of interest creeping into the artificial voice and manner.

Although she professed not to be able to see where Molly's attractiveness lay; she knew well enough that men were not equally blind on the subject, and she was intensely curious to know George's impressions concerning his cousin's widow. With his unfortunate inclinations, there would be nothing astonishing to her in the discovery that he admired this little East End actress.

"A fortnight?" Molly repeated, with elaborate unconcern. "Was he there so long? I did not know. Perhaps he is fond of fishing. There is plenty of fishing to be got there, you know."

"George detests it. There is not enough excitement about it. How did you and he get on together, Mrs. Arthur?"

Molly looked down at her scarred finger-tips, still so tender to the touch that she could hardly hold a fork. How had they "got on" together? she was asking of herself sorrowfully.

"He was very kind and pleasant," she answered, "and it was nice to meet an Englishman; but I did not stay down in the village where the inn is. I stayed in our old house up on the hill, and perhaps that prevented our seeing much of one another."

This answer sounded satisfactory enough, and the questioner went on to another branch of the subject.

"Tell me exactly how he is looking," she asked. "I have not seen him for nearly two years, and I almost dread to see him again, for fear he should be changed beyond recognition. He leads such a trying life, poor boy."

Her love for her son was the one genuine emotion of her life. When she was speaking of him she quite forgot her fine manners, her anxiety to pose as the very essence of culture and refinement, and become for the time estimable and almost likable. "I dare say you have heard plenty of people discuss his immorality and wickedness," she went on, "but I don't suppose you have ever heard anybody make an excuse for him on the score of his youth. It is not that he was so much worse than other young men, but the after-consequences of his folly were so disastrous that they set public opinion right against him, and he has had to suffer for it, and he has suffered, Mrs. Arthur."

"He has indeed," assented Molly with heartfelt warmth, and then, recognizing all that her words admitted, she tried to withdraw, and in doing so reopened the other's suspicions. "That is to say, any man with a conscience at all is bound to suffer in such a case," she added with sudden breathlessness.

She felt Mrs. Mirfield's black eyes boring into her as she sat. Her fingers, still fidgeting with the pen-tray, began to tremble, and set the pens rattling. She withdrew her hand hastily, and took to thrumming on the table edge instead. Why had she dropped her guard the moment the other had dropped her attack? So long as Mrs. Mirfield had acted on the offensive she had been safe, but when George's mother grew natural and frank Molly had slipped into the error of daring to be natural too.

"Of course!" There was an element of dryness in the tone of this reply which Molly was keenly conscious of. "And George has a conscience, though it is the fashion to deny him even that negative good quality. It was very wonderful, though, that you should have discovered it during your extremely slight intercourse."

Molly sat silent. She was in such a state of tumult at the moment that she only had just enough presence of mind to hold her tongue. She was glad the lamp was at her back. She put her elbow on the table and leaned her head forward in her hand, and sat watching the thrumming of her fingers, hearing her heart-beats like the distant thud of a steam-hammer.

And Mrs. Mirfield, watching her, saw there was some-

thing more in the acquaintanceship between George and her than she chose to have known, though, oddly enough, here suspicions did not now glance in the direction of love-making. It must be something far more tremendous and wicked. She had grown so accustomed to thinking of Molly as a schemer and conspirator that at last she could scarcely think of her in any other light, and judged all her actions from that standpoint.

"Did you leave my son at Leuville when you came away?" Mrs. Mirfield began again.

And Molly was able to answer truthfully enough that she did not know.

"I have an idea that the last time I saw him he said something about leaving at once," she told her, glad to be able to say something "but whether he really did leave before we did I don't know."

"Very vexatious if he did; he will have missed my last letter, and it was important that he should get it before he left. I asked him to get me a photograph of Arthur's grave."

"But he could not get such a thing in Leuville." Molly was herself again now, armed *cap-à-pie* and thoroughly on guard at all points. "Why did you not ask me, Mrs. Mirfield? I would have had a man over from Rouen and had one taken for you. I had no idea you were so interested in the subject."

"Oh, it was not of such vital importance as all that," she answered, with a distrustful look at Molly's self-possessed face. "You have not told me yet how my son was looking."

"No, you took me off to another subject; but I don't think I can tell you now. I don't know how he generally looks, you see. He did not give me an impression of being in bad health, he looked strong and vigorous, and yet, the first time I saw him—no, the second time; the first I did not notice him at all—I was struck with the restless, unsatisfied look in his face."

Mrs. Mirfield sighed; for the moment she had forgotten Molly again in the other stronger interest.

"I wish I could get him home for a month or two," she

said. "I wish the earl would ask him for the pheasant shooting next month. I wonder if you would suggest it to him, Mrs. Arthur?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" cried Molly, all taken aback by the suggestion; and Mrs. Mirfield rose and took her shawl off the back of her chair with a sudden return of all her magnificent manner.

"Of course you could not!" she said frigidly. "It was absurd of me to imagine it for a moment; naturally it is the last thing in the world you would do, to attempt a reconciliation between the earl and the only male relative he has in the world."

"The only male relative?" repeated Molly. "What has Artie done to be left out in the cold?"

But Mrs. Mirfield took no notice of the smiling protest, and went on muffling her head in her shawl, and took a grudging leave of the pale, tired-looking little woman behind the writing-table.

Molly sat on there quite a long time after her visitor had departed. She was sorry that the first request Mrs. Mirfield had ever made of her had been so impossible to accede to. She would have liked to oblige George's mother; but just the one thing she had asked was impossible. What would George have concluded if Lord Netley had told him that it was to oblige her, Molly, that he had asked him to the Fallow? She grew warm at the thought. Further intercourse between them was to be avoided at all costs. Through all her pain and misery that was the one fact that stood out high and dry beyond the ebb and flow of argument or indecision. For them safety and separation, and, alas! suffering, were synonymous terms, and silent endurance was all that was left to them.

When Mrs. George Mirfield reached home that evening she found a letter from her son, which had arrived during her absence.

In writing this letter George's one idea had been to put a definite end to his mother's investigations at Leuville. Stop those and he stopped the threatened danger to Molly. Acting on this notion, he had gone in for a wholesale batch of lies:

"I have poked and pried and grubbed into the domestic affairs of *le ménage* Mirfield during its existence here," he wrote, "until there is not a dish that they ever had for dinner, or a gown that Arthur ever brought his wife from Paris that I don't know the make of, and all I can say is that, during their stay here, nothing happened to give the slightest color to your suspicions concerning the present heir. You must go farther back for your evidence, and get on an earlier trail. The Leuville covers have drawn blank."

There was no "happy medium" about George Mirfield's doings. Whether they were good or bad, he was always prodigal of his efforts. Moderation, even in lying, was apparently a doubtful virtue in his eyes, and his unlimited mendacity answered its end so far that it drew his mother's suspicions completely away from the Norman fishing-village, as he had meant it should.

But suspicion of Molly had become such a rooted habit with Mrs. George that, removed from one portion of her life, it instantly fixed upon another.

"You must go farther back for your evidence, and get on an earlier trail," was the line in her son's letter which most impressed her.

She slept with the words in her mind. They were there when she awoke in the morning, and before she had been awake ten minutes she had formed a new resolution.

The task of proving the shameless fraud which was being practised on Lord Netley was evidently beyond her. She would have to appeal to her plebeian brother for his help after all. It was regrettable, but unavoidable. It would be decidedly unpleasant to have Clem making himself at home at her elegant little dinners, the leading feature of which was "culture," but then the counterbalancing good of establishing George's claim to the succession was more than worth the sacrifice on her part; and if anybody in the world was likely to grub out a secret successfully it was the retired lawyer who occupied those dusty chambers in Gray's Inn and turned a nimble penny in the "private advance" line.

Having once made up her mind to the disagreeable un-

dertaking, she set about it at once, knowing that the more she looked into it the less she would like it.

She went up to London that afternoon, and early the next morning rapped at the outer door of Clem's sky parlors, while that gentleman was still discussing his matutinal rasher, with a note-book and pencil on the table at his elbow and his letter file and ready reckoner within reach.

When Mrs. Mirfield entered the room, in reply to his unceremonious "Come in!" he affected not to know her. He rose abruptly, drawing the girdle of his dusty dressing-gown a little tighter round his hips in a way which exalted the action into an unspoken apology for his unconventional attire, and moved a chair forward with a bow and a flourish which would have done honor to a Swiss waiter at a Strand restaurant.

"This unexpected visit has taken me unawares, madam," he commenced, in a polite but business-like manner; "you have found me, so to speak, *en famille*. My advertised office hours are ten till two; it is now"—referring to a "Waterbury," hung on a black ribbon round his neck—"just twenty minutes past nine. Under these circumstances apologies from me would be superfluous. Be seated, and let me know what I can do for you."

"You know me well enough, Clem," answered Mrs. Mirfield—and it was creditable to her discernment that she had left her habitual affectation outside the door of her brother's premises, and still further creditable that she made no attempt at cordiality in her greeting of him—"you know me well enough! There is no need to play the buffoon for my benefit."

"God bless my soul and body!" he cried in pretended astonishment, "if it isn't my aristocratic relative the Honorable Mrs. George Mirfield. Dear me, dear me! If you had only given me notice of your visit I would have had the place purified a bit. I don't think you had better sit in that chair. Last night it was occupied the whole evening through by the son of one of our large West End tailors; there might be contamination in the contact. Now, if you could contrive to climb up on the high stool over by the desk there under the window it might be worth the

extra trouble and discomfort, for his grace the Duke of Bradford's second son sat there for about ten minutes yesterday afternoon, while he signed some papers, and he may possibly have left some odor of ducal dignity behind him. It's worth the effort I should say, from your point of view, even if you do make rather a fool of yourself in the attempt to get up so high."

Mrs. Mirfield's dark skin went an angry red, but she managed to keep her temper.

"When you have exhausted your delicate wit at my expense perhaps you will allow me to explain what brought me here," she said. "And if, meantime, you could do violence to your own prejudices so far as to have the window down an inch or two I should be really grateful. The atmosphere is too suggestive of last night's grog and tobacco to be pleasant."

He laughed as he went over and threw the window up and let the soft September sunshine into the room.

The extra light did not improve the look of things. The "lady" who looked after Mr. Clement Borthwicke's rooms knew her customer's fads and fusses to a nicety, and it was her boast that she could fit herself to them all.

"Them as likes fresh air and cleanliness," she was in the habit of saying, "gets fresh air and cleanliness, and it's 'ard if them as likes dust and peace and quietness can't 'ave their likings looked after too."

Mr. Clement Borthwicke was among those who liked "dust and peace and quietness," and, however he might have feared about the two last named, it was evident that, as far as the dust was concerned, his "liking" was exceedingly well looked after.

There was no sign of anything lacking in the room, but there was a general air of "grubbiness," which told its own story of habitual neglect.

Mrs. Mirfield glanced round at the untidy litter of hats and coats and boots and pipes and newspapers with an air of distaste. There was only one tidy spot in the room, and that was the large office desk under the window; here everything was in scrupulous order.

"Does that suit you better?" asked the gentleman in the gray felt dressing-gown, as he turned back to the

breakfast-table again, followed, through the open window, by the twittering of the numberless sparrows who made a playground of the quiet inn gardens. "You see I am not a dweller in the marble halls of the nobility, as you are, so I have to make the one room serve me for breakfast-parlor, office, and smoking den, though, mind you, as far as the office business goes, I have to mind my p's and q's. If the authorities knew all the little ins and outs of my particular branch of industry I expect I should get short notice to quit. You won't mind my finishing my breakfast, I hope. I must get the table cleared by ten."

And he fell to work again without an inquiry or an expression of interest concerning either her health or her business.

For the last fifteen years she had cut him to please herself; now she had suddenly remembered his existence, also to please herself, and she could continue to please herself as to the manner in which she stated the object of her tardy visit.

"Of course it is business that has brought me here," she said presently, when she had watched the consumption of bread and marmalade and coffee in silence for a minute or two—not without an inward shrinking from the uncouth hurry of the performance. "I may as well say it, and save you the trouble—I should not have come if I did not want something of you, and, more than all, I should not have come if I was not willing to pay a fair price for what I want."

He looked up with a twinkle in his little black eyes—very unlike hers they were, in everything but color.

"That's one to you," he observed, chuckling in genuine enjoyment. "Mixing with the nobs has sharpened up your wits a bit, old lady. You are getting quite a woman of business. What can I do for you? I hope, for your sake, it's not an advance you want—Master George can't have drained you dry, after all the pains the governor took to tie your income down on yourself."

"No," she answered, "it is not money I want—not directly, that is. George contrives to exist on the allowance I make him, or if he doesn't he never applies to me for more. What I want you to do is to make a few inquiries concerning Arthur Mirfield's marriage——"

"What!" he interrupted. "With the little burlesque actress from the Camel and Howdah? You don't mean to say that is turning out shady after all? Where is the loose screw?"

"That is just what I want you to find out."

"Well, but what grounds have you to go upon? You must have some reason for suspecting mischief."

Mrs. Mirfield took a sealed envelope from her small hand-bag, and opened it and passed the enclosure to him.

"There have been several suspicious things about Mrs. Arthur and her little boy—things trifling enough in themselves, but significant enough when they come to be put together. One of the servants at the Fallow has been dinning them into my ears for more than a year past, but I would not listen to her, or, at any rate, would not be led into taking any serious notice of her stories. At last she got so angry with me for declaring she must be mistaken in what she heard that she copied down the next suspicious thing that was said and brought it to me, and asked me if there could be any mistake about the meaning of that."

He took the piece of paper she held out to him and read from it aloud:

"I am quite certain that, sooner or later, it will be found out that my boy is not Arthur Mirfield's lawful son."

He gave a soft little whistle and turned the paper over; but Mrs. Mirfield had pasted it on a clean sheet of paper, and the few words written shakily in pencil were all that was visible.

"Do you mean to say that somebody heard Mrs. Arthur Mirfield say that?"

"Yes, and wrote it down there and then, so that she should not possibly make a mistake about it. I've brought you the very piece of paper itself, because I thought it would be more convincing than if I copied it; but you must not make use of it to get at the girl herself. I promised her I would not bring her into it at all."

Clem read the words again.

"Of course you have formed some theory of your own on the matter," he said. "What is your idea?"

"I haven't an idea left on the subject," she answered him. "I've satisfied myself that she really was married to Arthur Mirfield, and that she really had a son, and that that son is not dead; and there I seem to come to a deadlock. There must be some meaning in the words if we could only find it out."

"And if there is any meaning in them Master George would step into the title and estates at the old man's death. It must be thundering tantalizing to you, my dear, not to be able to put your finger on the weak place in this youngster's claim."

She said nothing to this. There was a touch of the cat in Clem's nature. He must be allowed his vicious little claws and dabs if she wanted his help at all.

He sat still for a minute or two thinking, with his elbow among the crumbs of his breakfast, and his fingers burying themselves every now and then among the thick stubble of iron-gray hair which stood like a *cheval de frise* above his deeply lined brow.

"You've seen her marriage certificate and the child's certificate of birth?" he asked presently, still burrowing busily among his hair as if he were fetching his ideas from their hiding-place with his fingers; "and the boy is really her boy, not a substitute? Then there is only one thing that I can see—she was possibly already a married woman when she met Arthur Mirfield."

Mrs. Mirfield gasped, and sat looking and listening with open mouth.

"Some of these theatrical people are a queer lot, don't you see, you know"—this odd saying was pronounced "doncherseeeyerno," and was a very favorite expression with him when he was really interested in the matter in hand—"married people are so often divided, one in one company and one in another, that the marriage tie slackens considerably. Now, this woman, for instance—it's as likely as not that at some time or other in her career she went through the marriage ceremony with some actor fellow, before she thought there was a chance of her drawing such a prize as the Honorable Arthur Mirfield out of the matri-

monial lucky-bag, and very likely husband number one is still walking about the world, if we could only know the truth."

"And do you think she knew it when she married Arthur?" asked Mrs. Mirfield.

"Maybe, and maybe not. She may have thought he was dead, and discovered her mistake afterward."

Mrs. Mirfield drew a big breath, and laid a well-gloved hand on the table before her as if to steady herself.

"That is it, you may depend!" she said. "And that might help to account for what I never could understand before—that Abney Garth should lend himself to the deception. He has such ridiculously high-flown notions of justice, and if the boy is really Arthur Mirfield's son, and if this Molly de Courcy has persuaded him that she is a deeply injured woman, he would be quite likely to lend himself to a scheme for giving the child the same advantages as if there had been no mistake."

"Oh, the gentleman secretary is in the swim, is he?"

"Oh, yes. He has been Mrs. Arthur's warmest ally all through."

"Ah! Then you may depend upon it the young woman has made out an excellent case for herself. He wouldn't risk his position with the earl unless he felt pretty sure of his ground, that is self-evident. We shall have to be careful not to put them on their guard, or we may spoil our own game."

"And what do you mean to do, Clem?"

"Well, I shall have to grub my way into the young woman's theatrical career, do the friendly dodge among the people down at the Camel and Howdah, don't you see, you know, and find out where she was before she came there, and so work backward along the route. And when I come upon the evidence of a previous marriage I will sell it to you at my own price. And now you must hook it, for I'm expecting some fellows here at half-past ten, and my moral character would be lost for ever if they found a woman with a bonnet like that in my rooms at this time in the morning. You must just go back to Yorkshire, and keep as quiet and harmless as a dove, and leave me to work this affair my own way. If you pick up any hints

that are likely to be useful, send them on, but in all other respects leave me to myself. I shall work all the better if I'm not bothered."

Having gained her end, Mrs. Mirfield would fain have made some little advance toward civility, but Borthwicke would have none of it.

"This is a business visit," he said, "and we'll stick to business, if you please. My health and happiness has got nothing to do with establishing the illegality of the marriage between Arthur Mirfield and Miss de Courcy, so we'll leave them out of the question for the present. The subject isn't one of absorbing interest either to me or you, and if we decide to dispense with politeness in all business interviews from first to last we shall save an enormous waste of time. So, good-day to you, ma'am," he finished, holding the door open, "and when I have anything to communicate I'll write."

Mrs. Mirfield took the hint at once and went. In her heart she was hugely relieved to have their intercourse placed on this footing, and hoped most devoutly that he might hold to his present view on the matter all through the piece.

CHAPTER XVII.

RAKING A RUBBISH HEAP.

THE young woman who sold the programmes and directed the people to their seats in the dress circle—by courtesy so called—at the Camel and Howdah Theatre had a windfall that evening.

It was about nine o'clock, and the second act of the highly colored melodrama then on the bills at that particular home of Thespis was just over, when a man in evening dress—a by no means common object in that place—sauntered in and leaned his elbows on the breast-high partition running round the back of the seats and leisurely surveyed the house.

His evening clothes fitted him decently, and his shirt-front was neither creased nor soiled, but yet there was an

absence of that absolute faultlessness of detail which invariably marks the appearance of the gentleman in dinner attire. If a respectably brought up man dresses for the evening at all it is an acknowledged rule that he does it well.

This short-necked, thick-built man, with the clean-shaven, irregular features, the shrewd, twinkling black eyes, and the bushy, iron-gray hair, had neither a pin in his shirt-front nor a crease in his coat, but, in some indescribable way, he lacked that air of exquisite neatness which is one of an Englishman's little advantages over his continental neighbors.

But the young lady with the programmes had not sufficient experience in the matter of "immaculate finish" to discover this slight blemish for herself. To her a stranger in "a swallow-tail" was one of three things—a waiter, a manager from some neighboring place of entertainment, or a swell; and since this man with the bushy gray hair looked like neither of the first two, he must be the last.

Acting on this hypothesis, she put on her politest bearing for the stranger's edification.

"Could she get him a seat?" she asked in a hoarse croak, brought about by constant exposure to draughts.

"No; he would rather stand for the present."

"Would he take a programme?"

"No; he was not greatly interested in the piece. He would be able to find out quite as much as he wanted to know about it without plunging into the reckless extravagance of a penny programme."

This was so palpably meant as a joke that the young lady felt emboldened to snigger.

"Perhaps you know more about the piece than any of the rest of us," she said, with a knowing look; "last week I arst a gentleman to buy a programme, and he turned on me like an eagle an' told me not to bother him about the ridickerlus piece, an' I found out afterward as he was the man that wrote it."

"Bless you, no! I never did anything half so clever as writing a play," answered the gentleman, with free and easy candor; "my talent don't lean in that direction at

all. Just now I'm a good deal more interested in the playhouses themselves, and the people that play in 'em, than in the pieces. I'm writing a book about the London theatres, and I'm busy picking up all the information I can. I'll get you to take my card in to the manager presently, and asked him to give me an interview."

The young lady glanced cautiously round her before she answered. The audience, most of whom had left their seats for a breath of air between the acts, were hurrying back to their places, and she looked keenly in and out among the crowd streaming past, as if to assure herself that she was not being watched, before she ventured to continue the conversation.

"Our acting manager is such a harrying little toad," she croaked; "if he saw me a-talking to you he would nag at me for half an hour for neglecting my duties. If it's information about the theatre you want, sur, take my advice and go to that tall thin man with the long gray beard who's leaning over the back round in the corner there looking straight at us. The gentleman that's got the theatre now has only had it a year, and he knows no more about theatrical things than I know about the Queen's drawing-rooms. He's a business gentleman from the city that's taken the theatre just for an amusement, and a nice old mess he's making of it, thanks to the hands he's fallen into."

"And the tall gentleman with the gray beard, who is he?"

"He's the author of our pantomimes. He's written the pantomimes for this theatre for the last ten years or more, and he used to write a lot of the pieces, too, until this new management left off putting new pieces on and took to having the country companies up for a week at a time instead. They say he's wonderful clever with his pen."

"Why, he is the very man I want, then. What's his name?"

"Claxton, sir. 'Joe' Claxton he's generally called. He was a great favorite with the stock company here in the old days. The ladies used always to call him 'Uncle Joe.' They was all just like a happy family in those times, you see."

"I see." He fumbled in his pocket and found a half-

crown. "I'm much obliged to you for putting me in the right road," he said. "You have saved me the waste of a whole evening. Here, buy yourself a mustard leaf, or some pleasant little luxury of the sort, and get rid of that croak of yours. You'll never get a husband with such a voice as that."

She began to laugh, but checked herself hurriedly as a very small man, with a very large and very highly glazed shirt-front, and a very big paste stud, and a very shiny hat, pushed open the swing-glass door at the top of the staircase and swaggered in with the glance of an emperor and the strut of a cockatoo.

The programme lady's laugh died away huskily in her throat, and, hiding, the half-crown in her palm, she hurried away, as if bent on selling the whole week's programmes in the next ten minutes, from which Borthwicke concluded that the gentleman with the coruscating shirt button was "the harrying little toad" before alluded to.

This flashy little popinjay favored Borthwicke with an inquisitive stare, which would probably have ended in an attempt at a closer acquaintance had not that gentleman turned his shoulder on him and made straight for Claxton.

This hack writer was as slovenly and heedless of his personal appearance as Borthwicke himself at his worst, but his face was the face of a gentleman, and there was a dignity in the calm directness of his glance which no amount of outward adornment could have produced.

Borthwicke's experienced eye saw this in a twinkling.

"Good evening, Mr. Claxton," he said, taking a card from his pocket-book and offering it at once. "I have come to you on the cadge, so I may as well be open about it. You saw me speaking to the attendant just now; I told her I was in search of information about the past history of this theatre, and she said you were the very person to give it if you would."

Claxton lifted his shabby hat in response to the other's salutation, and listened with polite attention.

"You are a writer?" he asked; "for the magazines, perhaps?"

"Well, not exactly; but I am collecting facts for a man who is. I get the facts together, and the other man puts

them into form. You have been connected with this place for some time?"

"For the last ten years."

"Then you must have known a little girl that I met after her marriage—a Molly de Courcy."

"I knew her quite well."

"Charming little creature, wasn't she?"

The curtain was up, and two or three people near them scowled round over their shoulders at the two men talking at the back.

Borthwicke lowered his voice.

"We're interrupting the play," he said; "is there a place anywhere handy where we can have a cooler in peace? It's too hot to breathe here."

"There is the bar," answered Claxton. "It will be quiet enough there while the act is on."

"Will you come and poison yourself?"

Claxton accepted the friendly invitation, and having done their best, with the assistance of the bar proprietor, to carry it out, Borthwicke turned back to his topic again.

"Yes, that little De Courcy was a delightful little creature. I never saw her on the stage. Could she act?"

"I believe she would have made a first-class actress."

"Ah, yes, of course; she was quite at the beginning of her career when she got married. Was this engagement her first?"

"No; she was at the Lyceum at Birmingham before she came here. Philpott—the low comedian there—picked her out from among the 'extra ladies' to say a line or two in a gag-scene of his, and saw her talent at once. He got her in for the small speaking parts after that, and when I went down to see him about the part I was writing for him in that year's pantomime he brought Molly under my notice, and talked me into 'writing in' a little part for her. That was the history of her engagement here."

"Yes, I remember now," said Borthwicke, with the manner of a man who recalls the past by degrees, and making a chance shot on the theory that it must hit something. "I heard something about the Birmingham man—people said queer things about little Molly over that business."

"Then they said lies!" came the prompt reply. "Whoever was to blame, Molly was innocent of wrong-doing. She was treated shamefully. It was one of the worst cases I ever knew."

"Oh, well, I only know what I was told, don't you see, you know," answered Borthwicke in an apologetic tone. Mentally his ears were at full-cock over these reminiscences of Mrs. Arthur Mirfield's professional life; this old theatrical hand would not get in a fuss for nothing; there was something behind this Philpott story. "I'm only going on hearsay. When an actor busies himself to get special parts written for a girl, so that he may not be separated from her, it is bound to set people's tongues wagging, you know."

Claxton drew his brows together thoughtfully, and his next question was put abruptly, as if it were the result of a sudden resolution.

"Did you ever hear real harm hinted at between her and Philpott?" he asked. "I know how fond people are of playing battledore and shuttlecock with a woman's good name, more especially if she is connected with the stage. They get hold of half a story—always the worst half, by the way—and form their conclusions on that, without troubling themselves to inquire if there might not be some extenuating circumstance at the back of it. Did you ever hear there was anything more than a passing partiality between Philpott and Miss de Courcy?"

"Well," said Borthwicke, and then stopped, with a shrug of the shoulder and a downward curve of the lip which answered the question plainly enough without committing him to anything.

"Very well, then," returned Claxton decisively. "Since you have heard so much, I will take up the cudgels for the absent lady and tell you the rest. When Miss de Courcy came here with Philpott to play that pantomime engagement, she believed she was his wife."

"Sardanapalus!" ejaculated Borthwicke, too elated to suppress all outward sign of excitement; but he contented himself with the one word, and Claxton went on without heeding the interruption.

"It was a very bad business—a very bad business indeed!

And the worst point in the whole story was that the poor little girl was so clean gone on the brute—her first love, you know, Mr. Borthwicke, and you know what women are like in that respect. When she came to me and told me he had just confessed that the marriage ceremony between them was all bunkum, that he had another wife living, she was thoroughly heart-broken.”

“A case of bigamy, then,” said Borthwicke, his jaw dropping at this sudden annihilation of his hopes. If the Philpott marriage was not legal the one with Mirfield was, and the boy at the Fallow was legitimate after all. “Why didn’t she take the case into court?”

“She liked Philpott too well for that.”

“Well, she didn’t fret long anyway,” observed Borthwicke viciously. He was feeling very savage. To have had this prize under his very hand, and then to have had it withdrawn again before he could close his fingers on it, was the very acme of tantalization. “Why, she must have married Mirfield within a very short time of her heart-breaking discovery. It was during her first season here, wasn’t it?”

“Just so. It was Mr. Mirfield’s attentions that made Philpott own up to his villainy. He was down here night after night, with his flowers and his presents, hanging about after Miss de Courcy, till she was fairly driven into a corner and asked Philpott to let her tell Mr. Mirfield that she was a married woman. It was then that Philpott turned round on her and told her he had another wife knocking about somewhere, though he couldn’t put his hand on her just then. And when the poor little girl began to upbraid he coolly advised her to ‘go in for the young swell, since it seemed he really meant business.’”

“A nice man for a small tea-party,” remarked Borthwicke. “I suppose there really was another wife, Mr. Claxton? You don’t think she was a mere creature of Mr. Philpott’s fervid imagination, created to get rid of Miss de Courcy when there was such an excellent chance offering?”

“Heaven only knows! The idea had never occurred to me. I should not be surprised. Philpott was blackguard enough for anything, and his fancy for Molly had been long over and done with. You see, the poor little girl would

try to keep him steady—away from the drink and the betting—and he found it irksome to have a guardian angel always at his elbow.”

“No doubt,” observed Borthwicke dryly; “more especially a guardian angel with rights of her own. I don’t suppose consideration for Miss de Courcy would have had any weight with him in any case. If he saw a chance to rid himself of a wife who was too conscientious in her ideas of duty he would take it, without a thought of the consequences to her. You see, if that other wife was only a myth, if De Courcy was really married to Philpott, she was never Arthur Mirfield’s wife, and any children by that marriage would be illegitimate. The whole question of Mrs. Mirfield’s present position turns on the other question, Had Philpott a wife living when he married Molly de Courcy? It’s rather an interesting case—reminds me of Lord Bufton’s divorce case. You remember it? When he was a lad in his teens he married a woman ten years older than himself, and a dreadfully bad lot into the bargain. Well, his father, the present Duke of Draffley, sent the boy away, and pensioned the lady off, and some years afterward they, the duke’s spies, found evidence of a previous marriage on the lady’s part, upon which they entered an action for divorce. Well, my lady held her tongue, and let things take their course, until she was put in the witness-box, and then she quietly produced a marriage certificate which proved that husband number one had already a wife in existence when he married her, so that her marriage with Lord Bufton held good. It was an awful blow for the Draffley people; but it was law, and they had to put up with it.”

“Ah!” It was evident that Lord Bufton’s divorce did not interest Mr. Claxton; he was too much occupied with thoughts of Molly de Courcy and her wrongs. What if Philpott had perpetuated the wrong he had done her by betraying her into a bigamous marriage with this Mr. Mirfield? “Where is Miss de Courcy now, I wonder?” he said. “With her present husband, I suppose?”

“Oh, Mirfield is dead—has been dead for the last year and more. I suppose the widow has made her home with his people. What has become of Philpott?”

“Well, it is time he was dead too,” replied Claxton, much in the tone he would have used if he had been speaking of a dog. “The last thing I heard of him he was in a pauper lunatic asylum, a raving maniac from drink. I suppose the brute had a touch of conscience in him somewhere. He went headlong to the devil after Miss de Courcy’s marriage—drank so incessantly that managers grew shy of him, and preferred engaging inferior actors whom they could depend on. Whenever we have any of the old stock people acting here he puts in an appearance on the Friday night, which means passing round the hat on his behalf at treasury on Saturday. But I’ve not been dunned for the usual shilling for some time past now, so I suppose he is either shut up again or dead. If I could have my way,” he added, speaking mechanically, with a repressed force which was more significant than any amount of vehemence, “I would make a law for the extermination of all such vermin. Once prove that a man is a mere plague-spot on humanity—that he lives only for the injury of himself and his kind—and he should be removed, just as diseased cattle are slaughtered for the good of the greater number.”

Borthwicke laughed, as if he found the other’s exalted morality amusing.

“I should like to make this man’s acquaintance,” he said. “He belongs to a type which is passing away. Actors nowadays set up for being as respectable as their neighbors. This Philpott would make a good model to draw the contrast from between the past and present type. I suppose there is no chance of getting me an interview with him?”

“Not that I know of. Yes, though! Now I come to think of it, Tom Desmond, who used to be leading man here in the days of the stock company, is coming here with one of the provincial companies in a few weeks’ time. If Philpott is above ground, and master of his own actions, he is certain to turn up during the week. He and Tom were great cronies at one time. He won’t lose the opportunity of drinking at some one else’s expense.”

“I wonder if you would introduce me to Mr. Desmond?” Borthwicke asked. Even if Philpott did not turn up

himself, his old crony might possess some information worth having on the subject of that other Mrs. Philpott, who stood like an intangible shadow between him and the fruition of his hopes. If Mrs. Philpott number one really existed, in fact, Mrs. Arthur Mirfield was Mrs. Arthur Mirfield, and there was an end to his present plan of campaign. This Desmond would surely know if his friend had had a wife previous to his meeting with this little "extra lady" at Birmingham? At any rate it was worth trying. "If you introduce me to Mr. Desmond, I might be able to get at this poor devil of a Philpott and be the means of putting a couple of sovereigns in his pocket."

"Which would shorten his life by just so many more hours," returned the other grimly. "God forbid that I should stand in the way of a consummation so devoutly to be desired. I will make you known to Desmond with the best will in the world. Keep your eye on the advertisements, and when you see *A Madman's Legacy* announced come down and I will take you round to the dressing-room. Let me have a line in the morning to remind me—I'm a bad hand at remembering appointments so long ahead."

When Clem came to review the results of the evening's labor he came to the conclusion that he had not done badly for a start.

He had arrived at the theatre in entire ignorance of anything disreputable in Mrs. Arthur Mirfield's past, beyond his own imaginings; he was leaving it in possession of the fact of this low marriage of hers—a marriage with a drunken reprobate, who was regarded as something too vile to be granted living room among his own none-too-squeamish associates. Such a connection, legal or not, must always leave a certain amount of contamination behind it. The mere thought of the mother of the future Earl of Netley going through such an experience struck one as incongruous and against all decency.

His hound instinct was fairly roused now. Against Molly de Courcy he had no personal feeling whatever. There was no touch of spite—as there was in his sister's mind—mixed up with his desire to prove the little heir's illegitimacy; but neither was there any lofty aspiration after the triumph of the right.

The couple of thousand pounds he meant to make over the business was one motive with him, and another was the commercial advantage it would be to him to own a peer of the realm as a nephew. And in addition to these motives there was the hound instinct aforesaid—an instinct latent in most minds, and one which circumstances and his present occupation had developed in him to an unusual extent.

With this instinct urging him on, the check of the next two or three weeks seemed deplorable. He could not move a step forward toward the meeting with Philpott until Desmond, the actor, came to the Camel and Howdah. Could he do nothing in the mean time?

Why should he not run down to Birmingham to-morrow—Saturday was always an off day with him in town—and provide himself with positive proof of the marriage between Philpott and Miss de Courcy? Then, when he had established the non-existence of that previous wife, he would be ready to go ahead at once.

The idea was excellent. November once fairly in, he might find it difficult to get away; he would go to Birmingham while he had the time to spare.

The next evening found him at the Lyceum Theatre, in the capital of the Black Country, interviewing the manager on the subject of the Philpott marriage.

On this occasion he had decided that his hands would be less tied if he declared his purpose boldly from the outset.

"I want to prove beyond all doubt either that this Mr. Philpott was married or that he wasn't—I don't care a rap which," he told Mr. Jessop. "I am trustee for a little property left to him, or his heirs after him. Philpott himself, I am almost certain, is dead; but I have heard some talk of a marriage and a son, and the marriage, I believe, took place during the time he was acting here. You see, I can't pay this money over to the next of kin until I am certain either that this marriage did not take place or that there was no issue. On the first point I thought you might be able to give me a little information."

Mr. Jessop shook his head.

"We managers don't know much of the private lives of the members of our companies," he said. "I have no

memory of a marriage in which Philpott was mixed up, but I am such a busy man I might easily have forgotten. What was the lady's name? That might help me."

"De Courcy—Molly de Courcy."

"I don't remember ever hearing the name in my life. She was not one of our people, I suppose?"

"Yes; but a person of no importance, I take it. She was—now, what do they call it?—one of the people who go on without anything to say."

"An 'extra,' you mean, I suppose," suggested Mr. Jessop. "And now I begin to remember something of what you are speaking about," he added, "but I don't know that I ever heard the girl's name before. I did not know he married her—oh, but that proves nothing," he broke off, seeing his listener's face drop; "there might be half-a-dozen marriages in the company without my hearing a word of it. The people behind will be able to tell you all about it, though—the hall-keeper or some of the dressers. How long ago was it?"

"About five years."

"Ah! Then our hall-keeper, Simmonds, will most likely be posted up in the matter. Can you give me ten minutes to finish my letters for the London post?—I won't keep you longer—and then we will go round to the hall and see what Simmonds can tell us. A wonderful old fellow, Mr. Borthwicke—a living reference-book of all the events that have happened in the theatre for the last seventeen years."

During the next ten minutes Borthwicke confessed to himself that it was a long time since he had been so excited about a thing as he was about this Philpott marriage. No matter how affairs turned out now, he had enough unsavory evidence against Mrs. Arthur to considerably weaken her position with Lord Netley. Marriage or no marriage, this Philpott episode must tell tremendously against the mother of the young heir, and whatever told to her detriment must, he imagined, tell to the advantage of his nephew George. Even if he could not prove the illegitimacy of the boy, it might be advisable on George's account to let Lord Netley know something of his daughter-in-law's disreputable past.

He waited at the back of the dress circle until Mr. Jes-

sop should be at liberty to attend to him. The people in front of him were in screams of laughter over the piece. He had laughed immoderately over the thing himself when he saw it in London, but he had neither eyes nor ears for the clever nonsense now. His interest was all centred in this other drama in which he was himself playing a part, and in which the heroine had been unlucky enough to fall in love with an utterly unprincipled scoundrel.

It was such an extraordinary thing for him, the unemotional man of business, to be so eager and excited that it produced a feeling of unreality in his mind.

When Mr. Jessop came presently to the glass door at the back of the circle, with a bunch of long, slim keys in his hand, and beckoned him to follow him, and led him down long, narrow, dim passages, and through sly-looking little doors, each of which he opened with its own particular long key and closed carefully behind him, Borthwicke felt things were more dream-like and unreal than ever. There was something very mysterious and uncanny about these silent, narrow, blank passages, each lit by its solitary gas-burner, and each shut in at either end by a thick, low iron door, and it was quite a relief to the unimaginative money-lender when, at the opening of the fourth door, he found himself in the full glare of the footlights, with the laughter of the audience again in his ears, and discovered that he was on the stage, among the scene-shifters and actors at the wings.

Mr. Jessop paused here a moment to ask the official in the prompt-corner "how he was off for time." It seemed a curious inquiry, and the answer, "Oh, we're all right; we've made seven minutes in this act," sounded stranger still, until the manager explained that the company had to catch their train on to the next town within half an hour of the descent of the curtain that night, and they were playing the piece as 'close' as possible in consequence.

"Life in a travelling company is not quite such an enjoyable affair as people suppose," he said, as he led the way up the stage and through a swing door at the back. "If there is no continual study of fresh parts there is plenty of fatigue of another kind."

They were in comparative silence again now, in a dim

space with huge, high doors at the farther end, and with a large window on their right hand. But this window, instead of looking into the street, looked into another dim space, or rather a small room, where there was a small fire burning in a small grate, and a large alphabetical letter-rack on the wall facing the window, and an old man snoozing in an arm-chair, with his arm resting on the broad ledge inside the glass partition.

Mr. Jessop tapped on the pane, and in an instant the old man was wide awake and alert.

He rose when he saw who it was, and opened the door of his little den from the inside.

"Asleep on duty, Simmonds," said Mr. Jessop, with a touch of admonition.

"Well, you see, sir," he answered apologetically, "things are so quiet just about nine o'clock that it ain't easy to keep awake. The door is latched, and no one could get in or out without I pulled the cord."

"It's a bad plan, I'm afraid," said Mr. Jessop again. "Get one of your grandchildren to come and keep watch while you take your snooze. I've brought a gentleman to see you. He wants to ask you a question or two about Mr. Philpott—nothing to harm him, so you need not mind answering."

"Yessir!" said Simmonds, standing at attention, with his eyes on Borthwicke's face, fixed as steadily as if he was standing for his photograph.

"I want to know about Mr. Philpott's marriage," said Borthwicke.

"Yessir!" replied Simmonds, sharp and short, and waited again.

"I believe he was married during his last stay in Birmingham?"

"Yessir!"

"Do you remember the name of the lady he married?"

"Molly Davis, sir; afterward, when they put her name in the bills, Molly de Courcy,"

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"And you're sure of the marriage?"

"Quite sure, sir. That is to say," he added, with a

sudden touch of prudence, as he noted his questioner's eagerness, "I am as sure in my own mind as I can be, without knowing for certain anything about it."

"But," said Borthwicke, with his eagerness a little damped, "if they were married while they were acting here, surely somebody knew something certain about it?"

"Well, they kept it so quiet, you see, sir. They had been married more than a month before anybody knew it."

Borthwicke's face fell. Perhaps the marriage ceremony had not been performed after all. He had no great faith in secret affairs of this kind.

"Then none of the company were aware of the marriage at the time it took place?"

"No, sir; nobody."

"Ah! Then I'm afraid the chances are there was no marriage at all."

"I'll never believe it, sir," exclaimed Simmonds, dropping his military precision and becoming human and spontaneous all of a sudden. "She was one of the most respectable girls we ever had in the theatre—as straight as the queen, she was. I'd lay my life on it! The only pity was that she ever got to care for that good-for-nothing scamp of a Philpott. People thought it was a grand thing for her to be taken up by a man in his position, but it was the worst day's work she ever did for herself when she listened to his love-making. I'll be bound he's broken her heart, and her spirit too, long before this."

"Very likely," said Borthwicke, "but even that don't prove that he ever really married her—don't you see, you know? What I want to find out is where they were married, or where I can find somebody who saw them married, or even somebody who has seen the marriage certificate——"

"Then I can oblige you, sir," burst in the old man, with a sudden touch of recollection. "We've got a woman in the theatre now—she's dressing in number three, sir"—this in an aside tone to Mr. Jessop—"who saw the marriage lines with her own eyes. She walked home with Miss de Courcy one night—Philpott was off on the drink, as usual, and the poor little creature was so upset by something that had been said about Philpott and her in the

dressing-room that she wasn't fit to go home by herself, so Mrs. Maguire walked home to her lodgings with her. Well, sir, I suppose the two women got talking over the dressing-room quarrel, and it ended with Miss de Courcy fetching her marriage lines out of her desk an' showing 'em to Mrs. Maguire. That put an end to the scandal in the theatre for good. Mrs. Maguire just spoke out when she heard any one making free with Miss de Courcy's name, and that stopped it."

"And you say this Mrs. Maguire is still here?" asked Borthwicke, with all his eagerness restored.

"Send up to number three and tell Mrs. Maguire she is wanted here," Mr. Jessop put in, and then he took his leave and went back to the front of the theatre. "Let me know if I can be of any further use," he said to Borthwicke courteously; "but Simmonds is able to do all that is possible among the working staff; his word has as much weight as mine."

Mrs. Maguire turned out to be an elderly, garrulous Irish-woman—one of those talkative people who are capable of carrying on a conversation single-handed for an indefinite period, and the contest between her desire to make an elaborate recital out of the account of how she came to see Molly's marriage lines, and Clem's desire to get at the point of the story in as few words as possible, would have been immensely funny to an onlooker with a sense of humor.

"Did I ever see Molly de Courcy's marriage lines, is it you are asking me?" she ejaculated, when she had heard his question. "Av coorse I did! And I'd like to see the man, or woman either, who'd stand up fornint me and say anything different. It was the night that that backbiting little hussy of a Jackson girl had said——"

"Wait a moment, please," put in Borthwicke, lifting his hand to stay the avalanche of words he saw coming; "never mind about the hussy of a Jackson girl. Just answer me a question or two as short as you can. You say you saw the certificate. Did you take it in your hands? Are you sure it was a genuine document?"

"Am I sure?" she echoed, repeating his words, after the Irish fashion. "Am I sure I've got two eyes in my head? Very well, then! I'm as sure about that dockeyment. It

was the night I walked home with her after that insultin' little blackguard of a——"

"Wait, wait!" cried Borthwicke, with his hands up again. "Tell me, did you see the names of the bride and bridegroom, and their witnesses, and the address of the place where the marriage took place?"

"And why wouldn't I?" she asked reproachfully, as if she suspected him of a desire to get a rise out of her. "What would prevent me, seein' I had the slip of paper in me own hands, right under the gas? She'd locked the room door, because she didn't want Mither Philpott to come in and catch her showing the thing to me. 'He wouldn't like it, I know,' she ses, 'but I can't stand the insultin' remarks of them women in the dressing-room any longer. I'm his wife, Mrs Maguire,' she ses, 'and——'"

"Yes, yes, yes!" struck in Borthwicke, "we'll hear all that by-and-bye. Tell me, now, what was the address of the place where the ceremony took place?"

"The cirimony?" repeated Mrs. Maguire, puzzled apparently by the word.

"Yes. Were they married at a church or a registrar's office, and was it here in Birmingham?"

"Is it the marriage you mane?" she cried, enlightened. "I don't know that I ever rightly heard the name of the place where they got married."

"But if you saw the certificate you must have seen the name for yourself."

He was beginning to feel a little ruffled, but managed to keep his temper.

"Av coorse I did! Didn't I tell you I saw iviry name on the paper, and do you think I'd lower myself to tell a parcel of lies about such a thing as that? If you don't believe me you can ask Susan Jackson for yourself. She'll rimimber the night well enough, and how I walked home with——"

"My good creature"—it was getting to be a considerable effort to speak calmly—"I know all about that. What I want to know now is, do you remember the name of the place where Miss de Courcy and Mr. Philpott were married?"

"How can I rimimber a name I never heard in me life?"

she demanded, with a flash of indignation. "I'm as good at rimimbering as most people, but you bate me altogether when you ask me to rimimber something I never knew."

"But didn't you say just now you saw every name on the paper?" he asked, working up into a state of exasperation.

"Yis, I did!" she snapped back, "and I mane it! I saw iviry word on the blessed paper! I'll stand to that as long as I've got breath to say it!"

"Then how can you say you never knew the name if you read it for yourself on the——"

"Rade!" she cried, "is it rade the name that you mane? Sure I niver did a word of rading in me life! I saw the words whin Molly showed 'em to me, but niver a word did I rade from beginning to end."

For a moment Borthwicke felt like indulging in a good hard swear; then he saw the comic side of the business and laughed instead.

"Is it me ignorance ye'r laffin' at?" asked Mrs Maguire, with her face in a flame. "Ye must have a mighty bad heart to make sport of a fellow-creature's misfortin——"

"Devil a bit!" cried Borthwicke. "I was laughing at my own, to think how you've been fooling me for the last ten minutes. Here's a shilling; get yourself a drop of whisky. By-the-bye, you may as well tell me the address of the lodgings where Mr. and Mrs. Philpott lived. I'll go in the morning and have a chat with the landlady. She may have had a peep at the certificate to, and perhaps she was able to read the names for herself."

"It's just like raking a rubbish heap," he was thinking, as he walked home to his hotel. "Now and again you come on a find when you least expect it, as I did with Claxton last night, and then again, when you think you've got a good haul, your find turns out empty rubbish. Damned unsatisfactory occupation, to say the least of it!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CRUMB PICKED UP FROM THE WAYSIDE.

FOR three weeks Mrs. George Mirfield possessed her soul with patience, and refrained from all interference in Clem's proceedings, and at the end of that time she had her reward in the shape of a long letter from him, containing the news of Molly de Courcy's previous marriage.

"The nuisance of it is that I have not been able to put my hand on a copy of the certificate yet," he wrote, "and it is no good spoiling the whole thing by a little rashness. We must keep quiet till we can do the thing thoroughly. I only know the man she married by his stage name. If he had been married in that name it would have been easy enough to get hold of the proof we want. In a few days' time I hope to be introduced to a man who was a close friend of this first husband, and possibly through him I may get an introduction to the husband himself. It is just on the cards that I may turn up at Cramlingford one of these fine mornings arm-in-arm with that gentleman himself, which I take it would be rather a facer for the little bigamist at the Fallow."

The receipt of this letter threw Mrs. George Mirfield into a state of the wildest excitement, and perhaps it was typical of her disposition that, in considering the results of such a *dénouement* as Clem suggested, she derived a more vivid gratification from the prospect of Molly's abasement than from the thought of the benefit to her son.

She had never been able to forgive the poor little actress for having succeeded where she had failed. She had never ceased to begrudge the bright, sympathetic little creature the affectionate familiarity of her position at the Fallow, and at the thought of the swift, overwhelming degradation in store for her Mrs. George's heart fairly leaped within her for joy.

She tried to picture the scene—the entrance of the

shabby, broken-down actor, the sudden terror flashing into Molly's face, the theatrical manner of the declaration—all actors were theatrical, she supposed—"That lady is my wife; I've come to fetch her," and the shame and ignominy of Molly's exit from the home where she had been made so much of.

The anticipation caused her such unmixed delight that a sudden desire for a slight foretaste of the pleasure came to her. She would go up to the Fallow and enjoy a look at Molly de Courcy, on the same principle perhaps that a farmer enjoys a look at the fine turkey-cock fattening for his Christmas dinner.

Charlotte and Daisy had returned from the seaside last night; their arrival would serve as an excuse for her visit.

She timed her call between four and five, and found quite a roomful of people at tea.

Lord Netley was in the drawing-room—his presence there had grown to be a rare event lately—in a big chair by the fire, with Molly and her boy fussing round him. Charlotte and Daisy were at the tea-table, with Abney Garth in close attendance, and there was another young man present, a Mr. Kelper, who had lately rebought an estate in the neighborhood which he had previously squandered in the hot extravagance of his first youth.

Fortune had smiled on him again in the person of a rich aunt, who had left him all her money; and he had had the courage to buy back the property left him by his father and take up his abode again among the scenes of his early dissipations.

But nobody was inclined to be very hard on him, seeing that he came back to them with his hands full of money, and he was fast becoming a popular man in the neighborhood. Molly had only met him since her return from France, and Charlotte had been a little surprised to see how friendly they had become in the time.

Molly's prophecy had been fulfilled.

All those weeks back—what an eternity it seemed to her now, looking back at it, and yet it was not three months—when she was making such haste to remove Artie from the reach of contagion, she had said to Abney that the calm, peaceful life of the past twelvemonth was about to be

broken up forever. And her words had come to pass; she and Charlotte would never be again to each other exactly as they had been during that year of quiet domestic happiness.

Molly had known it instinctively in the first moment of their meeting, as they stood face to face with close-clasped hands on the platform of the York railway station. Perhaps the fault was as much with her as with Lotte, and yet she fancied it would have been the same even if she had had no new secret to guard. Lotte was not just the same woman she had been. Was it that Abney had made the most of his opportunity? Was it that Lotte, too, had her own secret to guard—had she, during the time of her little one's peril, found out how much Abney Garth was to her?"

And Lady Mirfield had seen the change in Molly as quickly as Molly had seen it in her; and now, seeing how pleasant and friendly she and Marcus Kelper were with each other, Charlotte was asking herself if this was the meaning of the change in the little woman; if this was why Molly's lips had taken that new little touch of patient endurance, why her voice—always one of her greatest charms—had lost something of its old sweet gayety, why her vivacity had grown a shade more fitful, her spirits a little forced? Was she attracted by this big, handsome young man, who was such a desirable *parti* in every way?

Mrs. George asked herself the same question before she had been in the drawing-room ten minutes, and gloated triumphantly over the possibility. She hoped it was so; such a state of things would add a piquancy to the feast she was promising herself. Her triumph would be perfect if the appearance of this disreputable drunken actor husband were to come in between Molly and such an excellent all-round catch as Marcus Kelper. She watched the evident admiration in the young man's eyes, as his glance followed Molly's dainty little figure about the room, and chuckled inwardly as she thought of the Nemesis in store for this swindling adventuress, who had dared to snap her fingers at the patronage of her betters.

"So it is really true that you mean to settle down among us again," she said to Kelper, when he brought her tea to her. "I hardly believed it when Lady Burton told me so yesterday. I think you are very courageous."

Kelper laughed.

"That is a very cruel remark, Mrs. Mirfield. If everybody did not know all there is to know against me, they would think I had been one of the blackest villains in the world, after such a speech as that."

"Oh, hardly so bad as that," she answered, with that indulgent inflection of the voice which implies that the speaker is making the very best of a very bad business. She was bound to be spiteful to any one who paraded their liking for Molly. "It is nearly always possible to a man to live down the past. It is only with us women that such a thing is impossible."

"Yes, it is horribly unjust," struck in Charlotte.

She had not seen the glance at Molly with which Mrs. Mirfield had pointed her observation, but Lord Netley had, and he put out his hand and drew his favorite daughter-in-law down to a seat on the broad arm of his chair.

"It would be impossible to fix the standard of morality at the same height for both sexes," he said; "nobody but a visionary would ever dream of such a thing. But, apart from the question of ethics, I would judge men and women alike, Lotte. Why not?"

"That is just what I want to know," she returned impulsively. "Why should a man's faults be so much sooner forgiven than a woman's?"

"My dear Charlotte, you are talking like a child," observed Mrs. Mirfield in her most refined manner, her voice and delivery sounding more artificial than ever after Lady Mirfield's touch of vehemence. "And what is more, I believe you would be one of the first to object if an alteration in the present unwritten law were suggested. A woman's life must always be above suspicion." Again her prominent black eyes travelled toward Molly; but Artie had brought a footstool to his grandfather's side, and was reaching up to whisper something in the old man's ear, and Molly was bending down to hear her share of the secret also. By this manœuvre her face was hidden from sight, and yet Mrs. George felt certain she was listening. "A touch of mystery makes a man interesting, but it mars a woman's whole life. What is your opinion, Mrs. Arthur?"

"And yet there is no greater fallacy than to suppose that

mystery must always mean mischief," said Garth, apparently unconscious that he was speaking out of his turn, and rounding his words in a certain distinct, incisive manner which drew everybody's attention on him, as he meant it should. It was almost as if he had said, "Attend, all of you: I am going to say something worth listening to."

"When I was at Cambridge there was a fellow in the same set with me—a hard-reading set, Lord Netley—who was looked upon as the steadiest, hardest worker of the lot. He was older than most of us, and we rather looked up to him, as a man who was bound to hold a very high university position in the time to come. Well, you can imagine how everybody stared when he suddenly threw up his reading and joined the most rackety lot in the college. His steady old chums—I among the rest—all turned up their eyes and declared he must be possessed by a devil. Of course we all gave him up, said he'd gone to the bad; that when a steady old chap like that took to evil courses it was a more hopeless case than any rowdy lad of the lot, and all the rest of it. All that term he went the pace royally, and when vacation time came we rather thought we'd seen the last of him.

"Conceive our surprise when he came back at the commencement of the next term, and resumed his steady life and hard-working habits as naturally as if there had been no break in them.

"Of course, at first there was a lot of talk about it. We all wanted to know what had been the cause of his outburst of rowdyism, and some suggested one thing, and some suggested another, but—and this is where the moral of my story comes in, Mrs. Mirfield—nobody ever thought of suggesting a good motive for his curious attack of profligacy. 'It was mysterious, therefore it must be disgraceful,' was the universal judgment.

"At last, when we were alone one day and we had talked ourselves into a confidential mood over our pipes, he opened out and explained the whole thing.

"He had thrown himself neck and crop into the fastest set in the university to get hold of a lad—the son of a man who had done him a good turn—because he saw no other way of getting at him.

"I had tried time after time to get him to my rooms," he said, 'but he was frightened of such a steady old buffer as I am, and wouldn't let me get a word with him; so I took heart of grace and followed Mahomet's example—the mountain wouldn't come to me, so I went to the mountain; and when the boy saw me playing cards, right on into the small hours, night after night, and sticking to my toddy with the best of them, he lost his old awe of me.'

"Now, that was a big lesson to me," said Garth, dropping his story-telling manner and looking round at his attentive listeners; "I've left off bracketing mystery and mischief as synonymous terms since then. Give a man the benefit of the doubt; if you don't understand his motive, don't jump to the conclusion that it must of necessity be bad."

"A man—yes," exclaimed Mrs. Mirfield; "that is just what I began with. But there is no such thing as a benefit to a doubt when the doubt concerns a woman—to her, socially, doubt and death mean the same thing."

"I call that awfully far fetched," said Charlotte. "Some women contrive to keep alive, socially, in spite of any amount of doubt. It is simply a question of assurance in most cases. But I want to hear the finish of your story, Abney. Did the steady-going old buffer succeed in reclaiming the young rowdy? I hope he didn't risk his reputation for nothing?"

"No; he kept the boy out of positive mischief, though he by no means made a saint of him. What do you think of my story, Mrs. Mirfield?"

"I don't think it touches my argument at all. I never said mystery harmed a man's reputation. I only said it was fatal to a woman's."

"And the argument is *apropos* of what?" asked Lord Netley, sitting suddenly upright in his chair, and fixing his blue eyes on the last speaker in a way that she knew well meant war. It was not often that he roused himself to active battle nowadays, and she was taken at a disadvantage and had to vacate her ground.

"I don't know that it was exactly *apropos* of anything," she said feebly; at which reply he made an inarticulate little sound in his throat expressive of doubt or dissatisfaction.

"You stuck to your point so persistently that I thought there must be some hidden attack behind it," he observed. "If you must fight at all—and you, my dear sister-in-law, are one of those estimable ladies to whom combat of some kind is a necessity—fight in the open. Don't stab your opponent in the back, nor strike an adversary whose hands are tied. You were talking about unwritten laws just now. I know of no unwritten law which demands stricter obedience than the one which ordains fair-play in single combat. It seemed to me that your diatribe against mystery in a woman's past had a certain animus. I may have been mistaken, but it seemed so to me; and as it is not because there is anything to be ashamed of in them, but purely and simply in obedience to my wish that Molly keeps silent on the subject of her theatrical experiences—makes a mystery of her past, in fact—it is incumbent upon me to see that it causes her no annoyance. Having tied her hands, it is my duty to see that no advantage is taken of her defenceless position. Any attack upon her I accept as an attack upon myself, and resent it accordingly. That is all! I hope I may not have to speak on this matter again."

He rose and held his hand out to Kelper as he finished.

"I suppose I ought to apologize for delivering a family sermon before you," he said. "Don't let it frighten you away; it is not likely to happen again. Abney, will you give me your arm up the stairs?"

Kelper took advantage of the break-up of the circle to take his leave at the same time, and the ladies and children were left to themselves.

In the general move which followed, Mrs. Mirfield contrived to place herself between Molly and the others. Lord Netley's defence of the little usurper had roused the elder woman's venom to bubbling point; she could not resist the desire to have another stab at her adversary.

"I think you ought to be very much obliged to me," she began, pulling her chair a little nearer the fire, so that Molly could not leave her position at the mantel piece without asking her to move; "I consider I have been a good friend to you this afternoon. I have proved the earl's devotion to your cause, not to speak of Abney Garth's—

that long-winded story of his was all on your account, I suppose—and I have managed to let Mr. Kelper into the secret of your stage life without any humiliation or trouble to you.”

Molly made no answer. She was thinking of George’s sublime self-abnegation, his utter selflessness, and saying to herself over and over again that this woman was his mother.

“Charming young man, Mr. Kelper, is he not?” the affected, drawling voice went on. “A most desirable *parti* in all ways. A reformed rake is always supposed to make a good husband, and his worldly circumstances are excellent. It would be a really capital chance for you, Mrs. Arthur; you may not get such another—your good looks are not what they were. If you won’t resent a word of well-meant advice, I should say accept him by all means if he gives you the opportunity. The earl is breaking very fast, and things are bound to be unpleasant for you when he is gone.”

“I think it is dreadful to talk of a person’s death in that business-like way,” said Molly, trying to get away from the other topic.

Charlotte and the children had gone to the other end of the room to look at a book of fairy-stories which Daisy had brought from Southport for Artie. Molly wished she could get away to them. She had a lurking suspicion that Mrs. Mirfield had some set purpose in this afternoon’s attack upon her, and her soul was torn apart by her desire to exercise forbearance toward George’s mother and the instinct to defend herself and her boy by the first means that offered.

“Death is always more or less dreadful,” returned Mrs. Mirfield, “and among the less educated classes the dread is very strongly developed; but these eventualities have to be faced, and when a person is in such a doubtful position as yours the sooner they are faced the better. A good second marriage is your only hope for the future.”

“Then,” said Molly, with a slight smile, “I’m afraid my position is a very hopeless one indeed, for I don’t believe there is a man living who could induce me to marry again.”

Mrs. Mirfield's eyes glimmered as they rested on Molly's face.

"But why not?" she asked. "Is it sentiment that prevents you? Can you afford to be sentimental? Is it that you have grown dainty since marrying among the Mirfields? Well, I don't think you can afford to be dainty either. Mr. Kelper may not be over-particular in some of his notions, but I don't suppose that would matter to you as much as it would to one of *nous autres*. He is not the kind of man I would give a young, delicate-minded girl to; but I believe that among the people of your class——"

"Oh, please let me and my class alone!" cried Molly, with an imploring little gesture. "You cannot know anything on that subject except by hearsay, and that is not always to be trusted."

"Perhaps not; but still, we all know that the private life of theatrical people is very free and easy. They are not so nice in their notions of what is correct as one could wish——"

"I think," said Molly, with warm cheeks, and hands which fretted nervously at the trimmings of her gown, "I really do think that you forget to whom you are speaking. You speak of delicacy and niceness among actors and actresses. I don't believe there is one among them, certainly not among those I have known, who would show such a want of decency, let alone delicacy, as to run down a person's calling to her face. If that is your idea of fine breeding and delicacy of mind I am glad you don't think me well-bred or nice in any way. Some folks' condemnation is praise indeed!"

Mrs. Mirfield rose and rustled the folds of her silk gown into their proper shape. She was trying her very hardest to look at Molly as if she found her little address on breeding exceedingly funny, but try as she might her annoyance would show through the pretence of amusement. She would have liked to crush the daring little person there and then by an inquiry as to whether she got her ideas on manners from her low actor husband. The temptation was almost irresistible; the only consideration which held her back was her fear that Clem would throw up the whole affair if she hurried on the climax before he was

ready for it. So she contented herself with that glance of scornful amusement at Molly, and swept away up the room to make her adieux to Charlotte.

Molly felt rather bad about it all. She was despising herself for her want of self-control. Why need she have said that last nasty little thing? Was that how she showed forbearance to the mother of the man who had behaved with such unheard-of magnanimity to her and her boy? She sighed quietly to herself as she recalled the remark about the decrease in her good looks. If Mrs. Mirfield had known the cause of that decrease, if she had guessed at the long, wakeful nights that Molly spent in passionate retrospection of those few bitter-sweet days at Leuville, if she could have suspected the ache and the longing that lay on Molly's heart always, night and day! No wonder her glance had lost some of its quick interest, her voice some of its clear brightness.

Twenty times a day Molly told herself that she was not really miserable; that, with so much cause for thankfulness as she had, she would be an ungrateful wretch indeed to make herself absolutely unhappy because of this one shadow which had fallen across her path; and yet she could not stifle that aching desire to know or hear something of George and his doings. It was a constant scourge to her to think of the great sacrifice she had accepted from him without a possibility of reward, and it made it all the worse that her heart was on his side; that all her blame was for herself, all her admiration—an admiration which was almost reverence—was for him. Small wonder indeed that she was losing some of her old brightness under the pain of it all.

Mrs. Mirfield got through her farewells at the other end of the room, and left without another glance at the forlorn little figure in the earl's big chair by the fire. She could not be even outwardly civil to Molly while she was smarting under the rebuke so deftly administered.

The air of the October dusk was chill when she got outside, and she hastened her steps down the long avenue, almost wishing, in her vexation, that she had not been in such a hurry to greet Lady Mirfield on her return.

When she was about half-way between the house and the

gates she overtook Marcus Kelper, talking to one of the Fallow keepers.

When he recognized her he said "Good-night" to the man and walked on with her, and before they had exchanged a dozen sentences he had brought the conversation round to Molly.

"I could never make you understand how surprised I was when I first met her," he said. "You see, I had heard something of the circumstances of the marriage at the time it took place. And I heard something else, too, at my club the other day. I was telling an old friend of my father's that I had bought the old place back again, and that brought the talk round to Netley Fallow and the Mirfields."

"And he spoke of Mrs. Arthur to you?" observed Mrs. Mirfield, in a tone which was scarcely interrogative but was yet distinctly encouraging. "Spoke of her in a way which led you to expect something objectionable?"

"Oh, no, not that!" he answered hastily. "There was nothing of that kind in what he said—old Royston is one of the most careful men alive in speaking of ladies. He only said he was glad Arthur had never regretted his marriage, and that he had used his influence at the time in trying to prevent the match; and I got the impression somehow that Mrs. Mirfield was one of those actresses who are supposed to be typical of their kind, and who are no more so in reality than the poppies are typical of the corn they grow among—a lady with a loud voice and plenty of pearl powder, you know. When I met the vicar's wife, one day last week, walking with a small, pale, brown-haired lady, with a particularly taking smile and nice bright, candid gray eyes, Mrs. Arthur Mirfield was about the last name in the world I expected to hear given to her."

"What is the name of your club?" asked Mrs. Mirfield. "Do you know if my son belongs to it?"

"I should hardly think it likely," Kelper answered, with a kind of inward smile at the idea. He had accepted the general estimate of George Mirfield's life and goings on, and was thinking that that social Jehu would have found himself rather at a loss among the jog-trot members of "The Dodos." "It is mostly a whist-players' club, you

see, Mrs. Mirfield. My father put me up just before his death, and through all my knocking about I stuck to the old affair as a last rag of respectability. There are very few young men in it. It's name sounds fogeyish—"The Dodos"—queer name, isn't it?"

"The Dodos," repeated Mrs. Mirfield, carefully fixing the name in her memory, "'The Dodos.' The name of an extinct bird, isn't it?"

"Something of the kind, I believe," replied Kelper, whose ideas upon natural history were of the very vaguest, "and there is a good deal of the extinct bird about most of the members. This Mr. Royston is a century behind the day. He was an old crony of Lord Netley's under the Derby administration, and he still believes in the future of the constitutional party. The Tory cause and whist are the only things he takes any interest in. I was quite astonished when he began to talk about Arthur Mirfield's marriage. It seems he gave the bride away."

"Of course," Mrs. Mirfield exclaimed. "I have been wondering where I had seen the name. It was on the certificate. And you say he tried to prevent the marriage? I wonder why?"

"Oh, he is just one of those antediluvian creatures who still look upon the actors and actresses as disreputable people! The mere fact of a man of any position marrying an actress would seem an enormity in his eyes."

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed Mrs. Mirfield. But she did not believe it; she was hoping that Mr. Royston had a more tangible cause for his opposition to her nephew's marriage than a mere prejudice against the bride's calling, and she decided at once that the thing was worth following up on chance.

She paid but a very divided attention to Kelper's chatter for the rest of the time they were together. She was still smarting under the memory of Molly's admirable little attack on her most sensitive point, and if her antagonism had needed spurring on—which was by no means the case—this afternoon's events would have administered the necessary stimulus.

As she stood for a few moments at her own gate, exchanging civilities with Kelper, she was wondering all the

time if she would miss that night's post. She scarcely heard what her new young neighbor was saying; she was conscious that he was in a state of beatific satisfaction with the world in general, and with the neighborhood of Cramlingford in particular, but she was too absorbed with her own immediate plans to examine into the cause of this rosy-hued view of existing circumstances.

Directly he left her she hurried to her writing-table and sent off the news she had heard to her brother.

"It may be worth your while to see this Mr. Royston," she wrote. "Even as Mr. Kelper told the story it sounded as if Mr. R. must have known something detrimental to the De Courcy woman, and K. would be certain to tone down anything against her, for he is half in love with her. If there is a possibility of any good coming of it, bring Mr. Royston down here—I can receive you both—and bring the two of them face to face. Perhaps this man could help you to prove the Philpott marriage or *liaison*, or whatever it was. If we can't disprove the boy's legitimacy it would still be a great satisfaction to me to crush that upstart little ballet girl. I think we can manage this in any case. For George's sake it is advisable that we should break the earl off his infatuation, as, if she were once out of the way, there might be a chance of George's being appointed guardian to the boy at the old man's death, with the run of the Fallow until the child came of age—and half a loaf is better than no bread. Don't let the dread of expense check you in hunting out this creature's shameful past. Anything in reason I will be responsible for."

The worthy Clem chuckled considerably over this letter, and thought one or two uncomplimentary things of the female sex as a whole, and of his sister as an individual specimen.

This daring young woman had evidently been one too many for the Honorable Mrs. George Mirfield in some way or another. Most likely she had been trying to do the high and mighty to the younger one, and she had given her a spoonful of her own pie. Trust a thief to catch a thief! The little East-end actress would be able to give the would-be fine lady as good a setting-down as any duchess or marchioness of the lot.

CHAPTER XIX.

“IS THIS LADY A FIT INMATE OF YOUR HOUSE?”

MRS. MIRFIELD had scarcely despatched her letter to Clem when Lessman's name was brought to her.

The nurse had been away with Lady Mirfield and Daisy, and there had been no private conversation between these two since the night Lessman had brought her old envelope, with Molly's most unmistakable admission of fraud, to Mrs. Mirfield. It was natural that the woman should take the first opportunity of finding out what use had been made of her information; and yet this visit, so soon after her return, annoyed Mrs. Mirfield excessively. It was a liberty. Lessman should have waited for her to reopen the matter. There was some touch of equality in thus taking the initiative into her own hands.

And yet, so overwhelming had her aversion for Molly become that before they had been ten minutes together it had overpowered her sense of injured dignity, and she was discussing the approaching annihilation of Mrs. Arthur Mirfield with the keenest gusto. And Lessman listened in open-mouthed enjoyment, and with a considerable dash of self-complacency, as she remembered that this downfall of Miss Daisy's foe would be due, in the first place, to her instrumentality.

“And it's really true that she was married before she married Mr. Mirfield?” she asked, when she had heard the story of Clement Borthwicke's discovery. “Why, she can be sent to prison for that.”

“Well, you see, we have not quite proved the marriage yet,” returned Mrs. Mirfield, growing a little more cautious, as she saw the girl's excitement. “But we have certainly proved that, in any case, she passed as this actor's wife.”

“But that's a sight worse than the other, surely?” Lessman's ideas were a little hazy on the mixed questions of lawfulness and respectability. “Why, if his lordship knew of such a thing as that I should think he'd turn her out of

the house at once. He'd never let such a character as that mix with Lady Mirfield, morning, noon, and night. Do you think he would, ma'am?"

Lessman's eyes were dancing in her head. What a grand finish this would be to Mrs. Mirfield's residence at the Fallow. Miss Daisy would have her rights again then; there would be nobody to edge her away from her old place at her grandfather's side, no little heir to monopolize the earl's petting and put the other child into the background.

"Oh, Mrs. Mirfield, Lord Netley would never have her a minute longer in the house if he knew the sort of person she was."

But on this point Mrs. Mirfield was doubtful.

"She has got such a hold upon the earl, you see," she said, "that unless we could prove all we said, up to the very hilt, he would believe her word against everybody's. It is very galling to have to stand by and see the fuss they make over her and her boy, and to know that they are a couple of rank impostors; but we can't do anything else just yet. It will be worth waiting for, if we can only bring this low, dissolute actor face to face with her, before the earl, and see him march his wife off back to her proper place among the sawdust and orange-peel of her sordid barn-life."

"Well, I should like to see that," muttered Lessman, her imagination thoroughly fired by the fancy details of the picture. "I should like to see the meeting between husband and wife; but, as you say, it is a trial of one's patience to stand by and see 'em enjoying things that they haven't got a shadow of a right to, and have to keep mum."

When the girl had gone Mrs. Mirfield felt a little anxious. Ought she to have held her tongue, even to this co-conspirator of hers? she wondered. It hardly seemed fair to keep back anything from the person who had first started the investigation into the matter—apart from the enjoyment of discussing Mrs. Arthur's approaching annihilation; and yet, now that the excitement of the interview was over, she began to doubt the prudence of taking the girl so thoroughly into her confidence.

However, it was done now, and nothing could undo it, so she did her best not to let the memory of Lessman's

eagerness worry her; and yet, in spite of her, it would come back again every now and then during the lonely evening that followed.

The morning following this interview the mail-bag brought some very momentous news to Netley Fallow.

To Abney Garth it brought the news of the death of his maternal grandfather, coupled with the information that he had left every stick and stone he died possessed of to the grandson whom he had discarded all his life because he was the outcome of a marriage of which the old man had disapproved.

To say that Garth was surprised at this stroke of fortune expresses his feelings very inefficiently. He had so thoroughly made up his mind that whatever wealth was his would be the result of his own unwearied labors that he found it hard to realize the truth when he was suddenly placed above the necessity of any future exertions whatever.

And this was not the only news he received that morning. The second item was of a less favorable nature. Mrs. Marston had left the home he had found for her, without leaving any address behind her.

This information was communicated in a letter from his literary friend, Mrs. Benyon, who bewailed her own loss most piteously.

“I am not only bereaved of a friend,” she wrote, “but I have lost the very best amanuensis I ever had. And it was all so sudden and unexpected—as unexpected on her part as on mine—that I cannot help thinking she acted on some mere impulse, which she may regret later on. She came back yesterday afternoon from a shopping expedition into the West-end, with her eyes swollen with crying, and told me she was obliged to leave me there and then. She talked a lot of stuff about making a poor return for my kindness of the past fifteen months, and cried as if her heart would break over saying good-by; and, to tell the strict truth, I did a little in the weeping line myself. I tell you this that you may understand how really sorry we are to part with one another; which brings me back to repeating my belief that she will regret her decision. I have an impression that she was persuaded into doing as she did by some

other person, and yet I did not know she had a single acquaintance in London beyond those she knew through me. Perhaps you, with your more extended knowledge of her past, will be able to explain to yourself what seems to me so inexplicable. The sad history of her troubles before she came to me was always a sealed book between us, so that I am all at sea. By-the-bye, before closing my letter, I must deliver her message to you, which I was nearly forgetting.

“‘If you are writing to Mr. Garth,’ she said at the last moment, as we stood hand-in-hand in the hall, crying one against the other, while they carried her boxes out to the cab, ‘tell him not to be afraid that I shall break my word to him. I am going to put myself right out of sight, and nobody shall be subjected to the slightest annoyance through me.’ I have been careful to deliver the message word for word, as it may be of importance to you to know what she said.”

This letter threw Garth into such a state of anxious perplexity that for the time he almost lost sight of the worldly good fortune which had come so unexpectedly to him. His mind was less occupied with thoughts of the probable value of his grandfather’s leavings than with doubts and fears as to the final accomplishment of his promise to Lord Mirfield.

“The greatest wrong a man can put on a woman I have put,” the dying man had said; “and I look to you, Abney, to see that the wrong does not bear on her more heavily than is possible after I am gone.”

And Garth had promised to do his best to protect the wronged woman from the after effects of his friend’s baseness; and hitherto his plans had succeeded fairly well. But now?

If he lost sight of this unfortunate young creature—let her go her own ways without troubling himself about her future doings—how could he be sure that his promise to the dead man would be carried out? If he remained in utter ignorance of her comings and goings, how could he be certain that the weight of that past sin would not ultimately fall on the head of its victim?

He had read his letters before the ladies made their ap-

pearance; read them leaning against the window-frame in the little morning parlor, in the same spot he had stood that other morning, when he had seen Lady Mirfield hurrying up the side path with that deep-bordered letter in her hand—the letter which had announced Arthur Mirfield's death at Leuville; the letter which had been the warning-note of the storm of trouble and grief which followed.

When Molly came down to breakfast he was still standing there in the window, so absorbed in his own meditations that he almost forgot to acknowledge her entrance.

Molly saw his preoccupation at a glance, and put her own interpretation on it. Since Charlotte's return she had seen the advance toward an understanding between her and Abney which had taken place during the anxious time of Daisy's illness, and she told herself that Abney was beginning to allow himself to hope.

All through breakfast-time she was conscious that he was fighting with his abstraction; and by-and-bye, when Parker brought a message from his master asking Mr. Garth to do him the favor of coming to him in his room, she turned with a quizzical smile to Lady Mirfield.

"More mystery!" she said. "It never rains but it pours. First our champion of self-control is, for once, so overcome by some secret influence that he has to be asked three times for the marmalade, and then grandpapa breaks through his livelong rule of remaining invisible to the eyes of the outer world until he is in full review order. What does it mean, Lotte?"

But Lady Mirfield made no answer beyond a shake of her fair head. She was herself a little disconcerted by Abney's air of mystery.

They were gathering up their letters and making their own move from the table when Garth came back again, looking less like himself than ever, and asked Molly if she would come to Lord Netley's room for a few moments.

She went at once, without an instant's demur. There was a touch of scare in her eye as she met Garth's intent glance, but she held her own gallantly until she was outside the room, throwing back a laughing word or two to Charlotte from the door, about her first glimpse into Bluebeard's chamber.

But the instant the door closed behind her and she was alone with Garth her manner changed.

"What is it?" she asked in a quick, terrified whisper. "Is it the grave at Leuville?"

"No," he answered, hurrying her along the hall and up the staircase. "It is farther back. Somebody is busying themselves with the Philpott episode at the Camel and Howdah. Keep steady!" he said, as she choked back a frightened cry. "All that is needed from you is a firm, steady denial, and the whole thing will be finished and done with at once. I would not have put you to the ordeal if I could have avoided it, but this is a danger that is best defeated by showing an unflinching front. Don't look so frightened, little heroine. There is not the slightest fear of discovery as yet, so long as you only keep a cool head."

The corridor leading to the rooms occupied by Lord Netley and his valet was shut off from the main staircase by a baize door. He hurried her along until she was inside this door, and then she leaned against it for a moment, her eyes wide open with terror and her hand close pressed against her pulsating heart.

"What a coward I am!" she muttered, with her piteous eyes on his face. "What a paltry coward! Bully me, Abney, bully me well; it will do me good."

"The boy!" he said quickly. "Think of the boy! Think, too, of Charlotte's grief and distress if——"

"Right!" she exclaimed, "right!" She moved from the door and stood alone, and softened her stiffened lips with her tongue and teeth, forcing the reluctant blood back to them, and attempted a little smile. "Charlotte's grief is the watchword. Go on; I shall get through it all right. Don't be afraid."

The curtains of Lord Mirfield's bed were drawn—this dislike to being seen *en déshabillé* was the last reminiscence of those old times when the newspapers used to allude to "the poetry of Lord Mirfield's appearance" during a debate in the House of Commons—and the old man was lying with his back to the light, with the clothes and pillows piled around and behind him. The face looked very wan and shrunken, surrounded by the billowy whiteness of the

linen, but the silver-white hair had been brushed back from the forehead, and the blue eyes, looking out from the wrinkled framework of the eyelids, were as keen and quick as ever. They took note at once of Molly's pallor—a different thing altogether to the usual clear, transparent color of her skin.

"You are very pale, my dear," he said, putting out his long, slim hand, as Abney set a chair for her by the side of the bed. "Aren't you well this morning?"

"A little headache only," she answered. "I never had much color, you know."

The old man patted her hand and cleared his throat a little. It was evident that, now he was face to face with her, he did not find it easy to say why he had sent for her.

He even glanced at Garth, standing gravely regardful of them both at the foot of the bed, as if he wished to shift the task on to his shoulders; but the younger man remained silently attentive, and Lord Netley, with a dash of impatience at his own weakness, made his statement as quickly as he could.

"The fact is, my dear child, somebody has constituted themselves your enemy, and wants to harm you in my estimation. I have had an anonymous letter this morning containing a very shocking accusation against you."

Molly went a shade paler than before, but her eyes never wavered. She kept her quietly attentive gaze on his face, and waited for him to go on.

"It is such a terrible thing that at first I thought I would say nothing at all to you, and just throw the letter into the fire; but Abney seemed to think it would be an injustice not to give you a chance of denying the foul charge, so we decided to let you read the abominable thing for yourself."

"It was very kind of you, Abney," she said. "Where is this awful accusation?"

Garth picked up a paper from the table at the foot of the bed.

"Come to the window," he suggested. "You will hardly be able to make it out over there. The writing is not the most legible in the world."

She did as he told her, with a glance of recognition for

his thoughtfulness, and he put the dirty, ill-written scrawl into her hand, and went back to Lord Netley's bedside and began to talk quietly to him.

It was perhaps two minutes before Molly came back again and took Abney's place at the foot of the bed, and the two men dropped their talk as she came and looked at her.

“I have read it,” she said, with a queer little break in her voice, “and it is very horrible—all of it. Now what part of it do you want me to deny? It says here, at the bottom of the second page: ‘Now, the state of the case is this—either she was this drunken actor's wife or she wasn't; if she was, she is not your son's widow, as Philpott was alive at the time of her second marriage, and perhaps is still alive; if she was not his wife, what was she? His mistress? If so, do you consider this lady a fit inmate of your house, a fit associate for Lord Mirfield's widow?’”

She put the paper down and straightened her throat, just as she had straightened it that day at Leuville when she had rehearsed a little scene between herself and Lord Netley, for George Mirfield's edification, and George had called it “a pretty piece of acting.”

“Well, I deny all that, unreservedly, grandpapa,” she said. “It is either a malicious fabrication or a most surprising mistake. The only explanation I can think of is that I have been mixed up with another actress bearing the same name. I never knew a man named Philpott; I was never wife to any man but your son; and, on strictly moral grounds, I know nothing that renders me unfit to be an inmate of your house or an associate of Charlotte's.”

She spoke her little speech with her eyes steadily on his, though her lips were trembling in a way that made him feel he had treated her very badly.

“My dear, I am ashamed of myself for letting you see the dastardly thing,” he said. You must scold Abney, not me. He insisted that I should always be suspicious of you if the charge was not faced boldly; and I wanted to feel sure there was no foundation at all in it, Molly. It is true we are not a very respectable lot, taking us all the way round, but it would have been something new to have had a bigamist in the family.”

She laughed as if she thought the bigamist idea very funny, but the laugh turned with sudden, startling abruptness into a burst of sobs, and she leaned her head on her hands, at the foot of the bed, and cried.

Lord Netley's distress was almost as great as hers. "Bring her to me, Abney!" he said, and when she was kneeling at his side, within reach, he stroked her down-bent head and kissed her cold fingers in a state of the most abject penitence.

"If I could only find the miscreant who sent the letter," he said wrathfully, "I would press for the very heaviest sentence the law can give for libel. The mean, pettifogging scoundrel, to stab in the dark like this! Who is your cowardly enemy, Molly, my dear? There must be some purpose behind an attack of this kind. Surely my sister-in-law would never let her jealousy lead her into such a deplorable mistake as this?"

"Oh, no," cried Moll, "she would not do it!"

"At any rate she would not do it so immediately after all that was said yesterday afternoon," Garth interposed. "She would see for herself how suspicious it would look against her."

The force of this argument was undeniable, and yet who else had ever shown the faintest animus against Molly, who else had any reason to desire her removal?

"If I may have a voice in the matter," she said by-and-bye, lifting her tear-stained face from the bed-clothes, "if my wishes may have any weight, I should say, Don't lift a finger to find out who sent the letter! Let the thing finish now, here, this minute—let me throw the cruel thing in the fire—and let us forget all about it, as if it had never happened."

And that was how the matter was finally decided. And when Molly went away to her own room to get rid of the signs of her tears, it had been settled that the affair was to end where it had begun—that nobody but themselves were to be any the wiser for the events of the morning.

Before Abney left Lord Netley's room he communicated the news of his legacy, and obtained leave of absence for a few days to attend to his own affairs in London.

His lordship's mind was divided over the news.

For Abney he was unreservedly glad, for himself undeniably troubled.

“The thought of losing you had never occurred to me,” he said. “There is not much of life left in me, and I had looked forward to having you with me to the end. I shall be lost without you, Abney, absolutely lost.”

“But I hope you don’t mean to turn me out because my grandfather has left his money to me?” answered Abney affectionately. “For these ten years past you have treated me more like a son than a dependent; let me have my turn now, sir; let me think of you more as a father than an employer. There are certain things that must be seen to, but, once they are settled, your call on my time will always stand first. I have worked well for the money you have paid me, but I will work better still, for mere love of the task, if you will still let me look on your house as my home. So long as you want me, sir, I shall want to be here.”

Lord Netley put out a shaking hand.

“Good lad!” he said. “You always were a good lad, Abney. And your sacrifice won’t be for long, I think; you will hardly have time to feel it a sacrifice before it will be over.”

“I hope not, sir,” answered Abney warmly, “and I think not. You have been a little overpowered by this scene this morning, and feel shaken; but there is many a year of useful work before you still.”

The old man shook his head quietly. “See me again before you start,” he said; “but find out that child now, and comfort her if you can. This business has been cruelly hard upon her. A nice return for all her bright goodness to me, isn’t it, to break her heart with such an accusation as that? Find her out, Abney, and tell her how sorry I am that she should have been so upset.”

“I’ll tell her what will please her more than that, sir,” returned Abney, from the door; “I’ll tell her that you count on her help while I am away. Nothing pleases her so much as to feel that she is of real use to you.”

He went at once to the other side of the house, where Molly’s rooms and the nurseries all opened on to one small upstairs hall. She apparently heard him coming, for she

opened the door of her sitting-room before he got up to it, and beckoned him in.

"I hoped you would come," she said, walking restlessly about the room as she spoke. "I want to talk to somebody; it hurts me to have to keep silence when I'm in this state. Abney, it was horrible! Horrible to have to dodge round the truth in that way! I don't think I could face out many scenes like that. It was simply horrible!"

She put her hands up before her eyes, as if in that way she hoped to shut out the memory of what she had gone through.

"I don't think I really realized the frightfulness of my position while I was there, in his presence, with all my mind bent on keeping the truth from him. It would be terrible for him to know now, Abney—a thousand times worse than if he had known from the first. Abney, who wrote that letter?"

The question was put with a sudden change of tone, and she stopped her walk to face him.

"Is it Mrs. Mirfield? How does she know anything about that old, old affair? I thought Molly de Courcy's past was buried out of sight and hearing forever. If I could have foreseen such a thing as this coming up against me, I don't think I should ever have undertaken the task of trying to live down the prejudice against those theatrical experiences. It would have been better—oh, much better!—for my boy and me to have hidden our heads humbly from the first, than to run the risk of discovery and disgrace so late in the day as this. Who is it that is poking and prying about and hunting up these things against me?"

Garth shook his head. He was looking grave and anxious, as if he fully realized the peril of the situation, and was at the same time solicitous to spare her if he could.

"I cannot conceive who else but Mrs. George Mirfield would trouble themselves to set Lord Netley's mind against you; and yet I can't think she would have gone straight home, after yesterday afternoon's talk, and written that letter. She is too shrewd; she would, at least, have waited

a few days, until we had had time to forget her scarcely concealed attack on you.”

“Then there is somebody else working against me!” she cried, with a horrified little gesture. “Abney, I had better throw the game up, and run away and hide myself from the poor old man’s fury and Charlotte’s reproaches. The whole truth must come out, and I can’t face the shame and the suffering that is bound to come with it. I had better go and hide my head somewhere.”

He caught her restless hands and held them firmly, as if to compel her to greater self-control.

“My dear little friend, listen to me. If you won’t be calm for your own sake, be calm for mine. Think what it must be to me to see you in this distressed state, and to know that it has been brought about through my instrumentality. If you could know what a reproach it is to me——”

“You mustn’t say that!” she broke in. “I won’t hear you blame yourself for a moment! You have been my strength and defence all through. Don’t notice what I am saying just now, Abney. I am half hysterical with fear and excitement. I never meant to blame you, never! I shall talk differently to-morrow, when I have got back my scattered senses.”

“But I want you to get them back now, this moment, he told her, smiling encouragingly down into her white, wild little face. “I want to talk serious business with you, and how can I do it while you look at me in that scared, piteous fashion? Let me tell you something about myself. A change of thought will steady you, perhaps. I have had news this morning of the death of my mother’s father—a man I never saw in my life, so I may be excused from making any formal protestations of grief—and he has left all his money to me.”

“Oh, I am glad,” she said, wringing his hands with tremulous eagerness; “indeed, Abney, I am glad! I knew there was something at breakfast-time. Shall you be rich, Abney—as rich as you want to be?”

He had touched the right string in making a demand upon her sympathy.

"As rich as I want to be?" he repeated, meeting her glance with a touch of consciousness. "Is any man ever that? And, besides, I don't think any amount of mere worldly riches would give me confidence in the way you mean; but at any rate I am not at such an impossible disadvantage as when I had nothing in the world beyond Lord Netley's salary to share with any one."

Knowing him so thoroughly, she knew this was a great deal for him to say.

"I am so glad for you," she said again. "I always told you you would be happy some day. I can't be as enthusiastic as I ought to be over your good fortune—all the gladness is crushed out of me just now by this other awful business—but nobody will be more delighted over your happiness than I shall, Abney."

"Ah, now you are taking too much for granted," he exclaimed. But even as he said it his hopefulness would show itself in his face, glimmering through the self-repression which had stood the test of ten years' wear and tear.

His iron self-control had stood out against all those days and months and years of hopeless endurance, but it seemed likely to melt at the first warm breath of happy anticipation. Perhaps he felt something of this himself, and shrank sensitively from the fear of becoming effusive. To a man of his disposition some such idea would certainly present itself. He turned the talk back abruptly from his affairs to hers.

"Of course there are lots of things to be seen to in connection with my grandfather's estate. I am going up to London to-day, and while I am there I shall try to find out who it is that is busying themselves about the affair with Philpott. If necessary I will try to find out his present whereabouts, and make it worth his while to keep out of the way."

"Ah, no, don't do that!" she cried. "There is danger that way, Abney. We can't touch those theatrical experiences without grave risk. Think what might happen if that poor unhappy wretch forced himself into my presence. Let the past rest, Abney; let it rest, I beg of you!"

"But we dare not," he answered her. "Can't you see for yourself that we dare not? Suppose the writer of that

letter goes a step farther? Scores of people know where Arthur Mirfield's wife came from. Suppose this person who is busying him or herself with your past goes to the Camel and Howdah Theatre, and finds out Philpott's present whereabouts, and persuades the man to come down here, and confronts you with him?" Molly put her clasped hands across her lips to check the involuntary cry of fright which the suggestion wrung from her. "Where should we be then? Left standing exposed to the gaze of everybody, with our house of cards lying low around us. This unhappy man must be found if possible, and it must be made worth his while to keep quiet. Hush! There is Lady Mirfield asking for you outside. Can you see her?"

Molly went and opened the door herself.

"Did you think I was lost, Lotte?" she asked. "I have had bad news, dear. Grandpapa has heard something about my people—those impossible people who belong to that terrible past of mine, Lotte. It has upset me thoroughly; but you mustn't ask me anything about it, dear; it hurts me to talk about it."

"Poor little woman!" Charlotte said pitifully, stooping to kiss her tear-stained face. "Do you know about it, Abney? But of course you do! You are adviser and comforter in ordinary to the household. I'm jealous of you, Mr. Garth. Why should you be more in this young woman's confidence than I am?"

"And Abney has had news, too, this morning," Molly resumed. "May I tell her, Abney? The most lovely, most wonderful news, Lotte! It is a case of Cinderella's fairy godmother over again—only, of course, the sexes are reversed all the way round. In this case it is a fairy grandfather who is to shower good gifts on the quiet, hard-working stay-at-home—coaches and horses, and lands and houses, and jewels galore. And, of course, among the other things must be included the traditional handsome sweetheart—a she sweetheart, you know. It is a genuine fairy-story in real life, Lotte, my dearest, complete in all its details, and completest of all in its beautiful, gracious, smiling princess, who stands at his elbow waiting to be asked for her lily-white hand. By the bye, are your hands lily-white, Lotte? It is rather an awkward qualification,

but it is a rigid law in all fairy-tales that the princess shall——”

“What *are* you talking about, Molly?” Charlotte broke in, with a scandalized glance in Abney’s direction. “Has your bad news made you light-headed?”

“Ask Abney,” she answered, smiling through her tears. “Ask Abney to tell you the story of how Jacob served fourteen years for Rachel. After all, I think that story fits the present situation better than the pumpkin coach and the lily-handed princess. Ask Abney to tell you his wonderful news, Lotte, and come to me when you have heard it all and tell me what you think of it.”

And with this last piece of advice she got out of the room, and left the two of them looking at one another in a kind of breathless anticipation.

“He made me feel very humble,” Charlotte told her, later in the day. “It filled me with wonder to hear him talking so quietly of having loved me all these years. Just think of it, Molly, living in the same house with a man for four years, and never finding out that he thinks of you in that way! It is wonderful! . . . Am I going to marry him? I hope so, my dear. Such is my intention at present. I feel like a foolish school-girl about it, Molly—a school-girl with her first sweetheart! I suppose it sounds rubbishy to hear an old widow talking like that; but my first marriage was one long self-reproach to me. I always felt I had committed a great injustice toward poor Lionel in accepting him. This time there will be nothing of that kind to mar our perfect understanding. It is my first case of reciprocal affection, Molly, so you must bear with me while I gush a little over it.”

And Molly bore with it beautifully. She sat the afternoon through listening to the other’s discussion of the happiness in store for her. Very wan-eyed and white she was after the trying ordeal of the morning; but her sympathy was as ready as ever, and she was as quick to enter into Charlotte’s joys as she had been before to share her sufferings.

Some perception of this broke on Charlotte, when the sitting came at last to an end with the announcement of visitors and the arrival of the tea-tray.

"What a treasure you have been to me, Molly!" she said as she rose; "I don't mean to-day only, but ever since I first saw your nice eyes, all heavy with crying—as they are to-day, you poor little soul—looking at me, pityingly, from the door there, the day Abney brought you home. Whatever I should have done without you, my dear, I don't know. You have been just the dearest, the most sympathetic, the brightest little friend a woman ever had."

"Yes?" said Molly interrogatively, with a wistful little smile. "It is nice to hear you say it, Lotte; and yet it is miserable too. There is a touch of farewell about it, I fancy. You won't need my sympathy and support any longer. I've already been awfully jealous of Abney these three days that you have been home, and that is nothing to what is before me now. There, go along, my lily-handed princess!" she cried laughingly, as Charlotte stooped to kiss her. "Go your ways and be happy, and leave Artie and me to brighten grandpapa's last few years of life. One might easily have a less satisfying mission in life than that."

When Charlotte had got rid of her callers she returned at once to Molly, and took up the conversation where they had dropped it. It was rather pitiful to see her outspoken happiness in her engagement to Abney, because one argued from it that nothing less than a very deep sorrow could have caused her habitual reserve in speaking of Lord Mirfield.

They were still chatting by the window in Molly's sanctum when Amelia came up to the next room, and began putting Molly's things out ready for dinner. There was a door between the two rooms as well as those which opened on to the outer passage, and presently, a little to Molly's surprise, Amelia came to the communicating door and asked if she should wait.

Molly was rather struck by something in the girl's manner of putting the question, but she was thoroughly astonished when, instead of retiring the way she had come and closing the door behind her, she crossed quickly and noiselessly to the outer door and threw it wide open.

Lessman was standing outside, with her head bent forward in an attitude of intent listening!

She straightened herself and darted away at the opening of the door, but not before the people in the room had seen her.

Amelia closed the door again at once and turned to her mistress.

"I beg your pardon for taking such a liberty, ma'am," she said, "but I warned Lessman I'd do it the very next time I caught her listening. I heard her creep past the next room door five minutes ago. She's always at it, outside the doors and in the passage corners. I told her I wouldn't stand any more of her disrespectful remarks, and that I'd show her up, even if I risked losing my own place."

Molly was at a loss what to say; Lessman was not her servant; but Charlotte took the matter up at once.

"You did quite right, Amelia," she said. "I am much obliged to you."

Lessman left the Fallow that evening, bag and baggage. There was a tearful scene between her and Lady Mirfield, in the course of which she made several attempts to slip in an insinuation to the effect that Lady Mirfield was "nourishing a viper in her bosom;" but she stopped when Charlotte told her she was only doing herself harm, and asked her how she could expect to get another situation without a character.

She called upon Mrs. Mirfield, as she passed the house outside the lodge gates, hoping for a little sympathy; but finding she was no longer likely to be of use, Mrs. Mirfield received her with chilling frigidity, and then Lessman broke down entirely.

"I can earn my own living always," she sobbed, rubbing her eyes and nose till they all looked as if they had run indiscriminately into one big, shining red smudge. "It isn't that I mind, but it's being tore away from my pretty darling that's breaking my heart. And I didn't expect you'd turn on me like this, seeing that it's mostly through you I've come to trouble. If I hadn't been so anxious to help you on with what you're trying to do, I shouldn't have lost my place. It will be a lesson to me, though. Never again shall Ann Lessman be made a tool of by anybody. I think you'd look rather foolish, Mrs. Mirfield, if

I was to write to his lordship, and tell him it was you as egged me on to poke and pry and hear all I could about Mrs. Arthur.”

“Now, look here, Lessman,” said Mrs. Mirfield, trying to hide how exceedingly unpalatable this idea was to her, “you have been useful to me; I don’t want to deny it for one moment, but don’t attempt to put the loss of your place down to me. You have managed badly; that is the beginning and end of this affair. You have made the mistake that all you servants do—you have talked too much. You have been running Mrs. Arthur down, and Amelia has retaliated on you. Is that my fault? Still, I confess you have been useful, and so I will help you if I can. If your new mistress will be satisfied with a written character, I will give you one.”

And so Lessman departed from the neighborhood of Cramlingford, taking with her a carking memory of the ingratitude of human nature in general and Mrs. George Mirfield’s in particular.

And Molly, alert and anxious, lay awake the best part of the night, asking herself what Lessman had hoped to hear outside the door of her sitting-room, and wondering if there was any connection between that incident and the anonymous letter of the morning.

It seemed to her that her enemies were thickening around her.

CHAPTER XX.

“I WAS THE INDIRECT CAUSE OF ARTHUR MIRFIELD’S
MÉSALLIANCE.”

WHEN Clem Borthwicke received his sister’s letter with the account of the conversation between her and Marcus Kelper, and of the allusion to Mr. Royston, member of the Dodos’ Club, he docketed the information for future use. He had already made an appointment with Claxton to visit the Camel and Howdah Theatre that evening, to obtain the promised introduction to Tom Desmond, Phil-

pott's old friend; but if nothing came of that interview he would fall back on this Mr. Royston, who had been present at Arthur Mirfield's marriage, and who had tried to prevent the match between his friend and Molly de Courcy.

It was not the first time by many that Borthwicke had visited an actor in his dressing-room, but, even to his sophisticated glance, there was something rather gruesome in the dirty floor, the seatless chairs, the frameless looking-glass, and the broken, rag-stuffed window panes of Tom Desmond's dressing-room at the Camel and Howdah.

It was after the second act of "The Madman's Legacy" that Claxton took him round, and they found Mr. Desmond busy effecting that change in his personal appearance which five years of mental anguish and prison fare infallibly produce in the heroes of transpontine melodrama.

He paused for a moment in his quick, skilful manipulation of the grease paints, to give his hand to Borthwicke, and returned at once to his task of creating artificial hollows in his cheeks and lines of suffering about his lips, with an apology for his hurry.

"I'm on at the beginning of the act," he explained, "and it is a confoundedly heavy change. I shall be able to talk to you when I come up after this scene. Beastly hole to receive you in, isn't it? I would not have asked you into such a dirty den, but Claxton told me you wanted to talk about poor old Philpott, and that it might be doing him a good turn to see you, so I gave in. He was a rackety scamp was poor old Phil, but all the same we were all very fond of him, and it's a desperate thing to see a man with his talent go under as he's gone."

"Drink, I suppose?" said Borthwicke, and the other nodded assent, working busily meanwhile at an artistic patch of gray paint under his eye, intended to produce an appearance of haggard distress from the front of the house.

He was still hard at work with his pigments and powders when the call-boy knocked at the door, with the announcement "Act going up!" and he had to make a rush for it, slipping on his convict's blouse as he went. But he was back in a very few minutes, and when he had done the hospitality of the dressing-room he made a free offer of all the information he possessed concerning Philpott.

“Ask me what you like, and if I can answer you I will.”

“Then, to begin with,” said Clem, “can you give me his present address?”

“Not with certainty. I met a man at Derby railway station a few Sundays ago—you meet the whole profession at Derby railway station on a Sunday; it is a great centre, you see—and this man told me he had heard that Philpott had been packed off by his landlady to the workhouse infirmary, and from there he had gone on to the Redcross Asylum. Aggravated case of D. T.’s, I suppose.”

Borthwicke looked cornered. He could not hope to get much satisfaction out of a lunatic under control.

“He may be out again by now, you know,” Desmond added. “The chap who told me about it knew nothing about dates.”

“I don’t think he is out, Desmond,” put in Claxton, from his seat on the end of the toilet shelf. “If he had been at liberty he would have been down to see you before now. I never knew him hold out till Friday night before.”

“There is something in that,” Desmond admitted. “The poor old chap keeps a pretty sharp eye on the bills; he knows fast enough when any of his old pals are knocking about within reach.”

“Did you know Miss de Courcy—the girl he married at Birmingham?” Borthwicke asked, working round by degrees to the subject of the earlier marriage. “And did you know his first wife at all?”

“His first wife?” Desmond repeated, with an inquiring glance. “Had he more than one? I never heard of her.”

Borthwicke’s little black eyes twinkled.

Was Molly de Courcy Mrs. Philpott after all, then, and was his nephew, George Mirfield, the legal heir-presumptive to the earldom of Netley?

“He said himself that he had another wife, Tom,” Claxton jerked in, from his corner.

“Lookers-on see most of the game,” is one of the few proverbs to which the exceptions are few and far between. Sitting in his distant corner, puffing quietly at his pipe, Claxton had seen something in Borthwicke’s manner that made him suddenly suspicious of his motives. Why should this energetic, business-like stranger look so gratified by

the probability that Molly de Courcy's marriage with Mr. Mirfield might turn out a mere empty form?

"He swore to little De Courcy that he had already a wife living when he married her."

"Did he, though!" exclaimed Desmond. "Oh, well, I know nothing to the contrary; he knew more about it than anybody else, I suppose. The earlier marriage must have belonged to his private life then, before he joined the profession. I never heard of another Mrs. Philpott."

"She was known by his private name, perhaps," Borthwicke suggested airily. "What was his own name? Do you know?"

"I did know, but I've forgotten. It was an ordinary sort of name—Jackson, or Williams, or Harris, or some such name as that."

Borthwicke said one or two unpleasant things to himself anent people with memories like sieves. It would have been a very real gratification to him at the moment to have called Desmond a thick-headed idiot to his face; but since that was out of the question, he did the next best thing possible under the circumstances, and left the way clear for making what use he could of him in the future.

"Don't you see, you know," he began, reverting to his catch-phrase, as he warmed up to his work, "independently of my desire to sketch Philpott from life, I am greatly interested in anything that concerns Molly de Courcy that was. If you hear any news of Philpott, I should take it as a very great favor if you would let me know where he is to be found. I shall try the Redcross Asylum meantime, but I fancy there is not much chance there. They get rid of their patients with as little delay as possible."

Desmond was genuinely sorry to have been of no use, and expressed his annoyance with true bohemian heartiness:

"What I can do I will, you may depend on it," he said, as he escorted his guest down the grimy, rickety stairs leading from the dressing-rooms to the stage door: "I'll ask about among the other boys who knew the poor old chap, and if I hear anything I will let you know with as little delay as possible."

The next morning, as soon as he had attended to his own

correspondence, Borthwicke started off for Redcross. The more he burrowed into this affair the more it interested him. Perhaps Desmond's admission that he had never heard of any Mrs. Philpott but the lady whose professional name was Molly de Courcy, had done more than all the rest to whet his appetite for the task in hand. He had set his mind on marching this drink-sodden wretch down to Netley Fallow, and projecting him, so to speak, like a devastating bomb into the presence of the audacious hussy, who was carrying on such an artful game with that doddering old fool Lord Netley.

By this time he had worked himself so thoroughly into the spirit of the thing that he felt it as a personal matter that this scheming little adventuress should be punished for her gross presumption. It was natural that the money aspect of the case should interest him more than any other. The amount this woman and her bastard had cost the Netley estate he looked upon as so much hard and fast robbery from the pockets of his nephew, and, since there was no hope of getting the cash back, his usurious soul was bent on full repayment in the form of “taking it out of the debtor.”

If he found Philpott down at the Redcross Asylum, he would move heaven and earth to get him out for a couple of days—even if he had to take the responsibility of his removal on himself—and trot him down to Netley Fallow and risk the consequences.

It was striking twelve when he reached the gates of the asylum, and, as he lifted his hand to ring for admission, the heavy iron door was opened from the inside to let another visitor out—a tallish, well-built man, with clear-cut features, dark, deeply set eyes, and just the very faintest suggestion of a stoop in his shoulders, which looked like the outcome of studious habits.

As he passed out, with a courteous “Good-morning” to the gatekeeper, Borthwicke looked inquisitively at him, wondering if he was a discharged patient. But the doctor's first words set his mind at rest on that point.

“It is really a most extraordinary thing your coming here to inquire after this man Philpott this morning,” he said, when he had heard the object of Borthwicke's visit,

"a most extraordinary thing! I have only this moment said good-morning to another gentleman who came on the same errand. You must have met him as you came in—a clean-shaven man, with dark eyes and a slight stoop—looked rather like a clergyman."

"Or an actor, perhaps," suggested Borthwicke, his thoughts turning instantly to Desmond and his promise to set inquiries going among Philpott's old chums. "Yes, I saw him at the gate, and wondered if he was an outgoing patient."

"A very unlikely object for mania, I should say," answered the doctor, "too thoroughly master of himself for any leaning in that direction. I should say your guess at his calling was very wide of the truth. There was no trace of the sock and buskin about him, not even of the refined sock and buskin of the present-day actor. There was no flexibility in the face—expressive enough, but not a touch of the mercurial."

"And he came, you say, to inquire after this poor devil of a Philpott?" Borthwicke put in, anxious to get him back to the point. "I suppose, by that, Philpott is no longer here?"

"No; he went out only this day week. Four months he was with us, without a single soul making an inquiry after him, and now, before he has been gone a week, here are two of you! What has happened to him all at once? Has he come into a fortune?"

"Not that I know of, doctor."

"Well, it would not be much good to him now if he had. The poor fellow is in the last stage of a galloping consumption. Whatever your business is with him, I advise you to lose no time; he won't last through the winter."

"Can you tell me where he went to from here?"

"I believe he was going back to his wife."

"What!"

In his surprise he nearly shouted the word; and seeing his unlimited astonishment, the doctor in turn looked curious.

"I thought, at least I heard," floundered Clem, desperately afraid of committing himself in the midst of all his amazement, "I heard that his wife was dead years ago,

don't you see you know, doctor. Good Heavens! you've bowled me clean over with your talk of his going back to her. Are you sure he has gone to her?”

“No, indeed, I am not! I only know he said he was going. Molly had influential friends, he said—he always spoke of her as ‘Molly’—and badly as he had behaved to her, he knew she would not see him want if he only screwed up his courage to make an appeal to her.”

“Well,” said Borthwicke, “well, this beats me hollow! It's his second wife that he has gone to, then. I thought at first you meant the other. Well, I hope he *has* gone to her, that is all I can say; personally it will save me a heap of trouble. Good-day, doctor. Sorry to have troubled you for nothing. You've given me the biggest surprise I've had for many a day, don't you see you know, and I'm not quite certain yet if I'm on my head or my heels. Good-day.”

His excitement was real enough of its kind, but it did not dim the trained shrewdness of his reasoning powers. Now was the time to bring the thing to a head, while Philpott was in the mind to make his claim on Molly.

As he went out of the gates he inquired of the lodge-keeper the nearest way to a telegraph office, and sent off a long message to his sister, asking if there had been any signs of a shabby stranger inquiring after Mrs. Arthur at the Fallow.

The answer did not reach him until six o'clock. Mrs. Mirfield had been to the Fallow in the mean time and interviewed the servants, but it contained some genuinely exciting news.

There was a shabby stranger now staying at the Cramlingford village inn, who had made several attempts to see the ladies at the Fallow.

Clem felt like going down to Cramlingford himself; but then, if he stood face to face with this Philpott, he could not swear to him. What he wanted was somebody who knew the man. Where could he find somebody who would go to Cramlingford with him, and identify this broken-down comedian?

And in answer to the question his thoughts flew to his sister's letter, the letter she had written after her walk

with Kelper, in which she gave Clem the information about that Mr. Royston, who had acted as the bride's putative father at Arthur Mirfield's marriage.

Perhaps this man, having been mixed up in the affair, knew Philpott by sight. Could he induce him to go down to Cramlingford? He would go down to the club and see him in any case, and steer his course according to the nature of the ground as he went forward. He must see the man and take his measure before he could decide on the method of attack; but get him down to Cramlingford by hook or by crook he would, if he turned out likely to be of any use.

Circumstances favored his first advance.

It often happens during the month of October that, even in the best organized whist clubs, there is a little difficulty in getting a congenial quartet together for a rubber.

Philip Royston was realizing this for himself, as his gaze travelled despairingly round the half-deserted card-room on this particular evening, and he had just arrived at the mournful conclusion that it would be a case of "dummy or nothing" when Clement Borthwicke's card was brought to him.

Of the name or its owner he knew absolutely nothing, and with three congenial spirits within reach that worthy man would have received but a scant allowance of the most freezing courtesy at the hands of the inveterate whist player.

But circumstances alter cases. In the present state of the playing strength he was glad of anything which promised a little assistance toward killing the night. He went to the reception room, feeling almost grateful toward the stranger who promised him a few minutes' diversion.

Borthwicke's quick, shrewd black eyes took him in as he came—neat, dapper, thin, upright, gray hair and whiskers, scrupulously brushed, frank brown eyes, a well-carried head, and a glance as direct as a three-year-old's. The items were all catalogued as he crossed the room, and the deduction, "one of your nasty-particular parties," arrived at before he had unclosed his lips to invite his visitor to a seat.

The little money-lender had been too long in the habit

of reckoning up his customers in a glance to make the mistake of allowing this man to see that he was to be made a tool of. This was a fish that needed the most delicate handling; the smallest strain on the line and he would be off out of reach, leaving the angler a hook the poorer for his pains.

“ You are wondering what is the object of this visit,” began Clem, as an easy opening to the conversation; “ but the fact is somebody mentioned your name to a sister of mine the other day, and she asked me to call on you and find out if you ever had any relations in the West Riding. She is mixed up in the administration of some property—reversionary interests under an old will, I believe it is—and there is a hue and cry after a missing man of the same name as you.”

This was rather neat as an impromptu effort. He felt distinctly pleased with himself, as he paused and waited the effect of his cast.

“ Royston? Is it a man of the name of Philip Royston you want, Mr. Borthwicke?”

“ Royston is certainly the name; about the first name I am not sure. Are you a Yorkshire man?”

“ Not myself; but my family comes from the North of England. An old will, you say. I wonder if by any chance it is a windfall for me?”

Clem smiled an inward smile of self-praise. He had hooked his fish, surely he could play and land him.

“ Well, my sister, Mrs. Mirfield——”

“ Mirfield! Any relation of Lord Netley’s?”

“ She married the present earl’s brother.”

“ Ah! I know, or rather I did know some of the Mirfields very well. Before Lord Netley came into the title he and I were youngsters together under the last Derby administration. Later on I knew his sons as young men about town. The second son, Arthur, I knew intimately, until his unhappy marriage put an end to——”

“ Unhappy!” interjected Clem.

“ Unhappy only from the point of view of birth, I mean,” Royston added immediately. “ As far as domestic happiness went, I believe the bliss of the young people was unruffled by a single cloud. But a *mésalliance* of that

kind is always to be regretted; and though Arthur persuaded me into standing father at the wedding, it is a subject upon which I always have, and always shall, feel very sensitively, Mr. Borthwicke. You see, I was the indirect cause of Arthur Mirfield's marriage, and my conscience has always pricked me on the matter. An old college chum of mine, a man named Claxton, had written the pantomime for that rowdy place of amusement across the water, and he asked me to go and see it. Well, I went, and took Arthur with me, and Claxton took us behind the scenes and introduced us to the company. And that was the beginning of the mischief."

Then Royston had certainly met Philpott, was Clem's rapid deduction, and would recognize him again. He must be enticed down to Cramlingford somehow. Clem was a little bewildered by this new combination of atoms, though, working in a circle as he was, he was bound to cross and recross the same ground continually.

"It is lucky the business turned out as well as it did," he said. "It might have been much worse."

"Not much, I think," Royston answered quietly, and the other saw in a flash that this "nasty-particular party" had reason enough in his own mind for his opposition to the marriage.

"At any rate," said Clem tentatively, "it has been an undoubted success from the lady's point of view; she has tumbled into a veritable clover patch. My sister tells me that Lord Netley makes a tremendous fuss over the mother of his only grandson."

"Well, I'm exceedingly glad to hear it," returned Royston, in a tone which signified that he had nothing more to say on the subject, and Borthwicke shifted his ground with the easy rapidity of an old tactician.

"I am glad you know these relations of my sister. I want to persuade you to go down to Cramlingford with me. Mrs. Mirfield asked me to try my best to get you down. She wants to get that legacy business settled one way or the other, and she thinks a personal interview would be the shortest way of doing it. It might be agreeable to you to look up Lord Netley while you are there?"

"I should certainly like to shake hands with Netley

again,” Royston admitted; “but I am a very poor traveller, Mr. Borthwicke. I doubt if I have the energy to undertake a journey into Yorkshire. It is like tearing a limpet off a rock to get me away from London and the whist-tables.”

“Well, I’ll make a bargain with you,” cried Clem. “Come down to Cramlingford with me to-morrow—you don’t play whist on Sunday, I suppose—and I will undertake to provide all the necessary energy for the journey, and get you back on Monday evening in time for your rubber as usual. My sister will be delighted to put us up for the night, and I will call for you, and convoy you from your door to hers and land you back again. We shall get down just in time for dinner, and you and Alice can have your chat about this money afterward, don’t you see you know? Then, on Monday morning, we can stroll up to pay our respects to Lord Netley and Mrs. Arthur, have an early lunch, and be back in London by Monday evening. All you will have to do is to put a clean shirt and an evening coat into a bag, and be ready to start at the appointed time.”

It sounded very easy, and the double temptation of the possible legacy and the interview with his old colleague was evidently very alluring. He demurred, however, to the idea of taking Mrs. Mirfield by storm; but when he had been assured that she had herself proposed that they should make use of her house he gave in, and yielded himself up into the enemy’s hands.

Mrs. George Mirfield’s small household had already retired to their rooms that night, when a sudden and important attack on the hall-door bell led to a general opening of doors and a chorus of startled inquiries.

But it was nothing to be alarmed at. Only a telegram which, having arrived too late for delivery at the Cramlingford office, had been sent on from the nearest central office by mounted messenger:

“Royston and I with you at seven o’clock dinner to-morrow night.”

That was all. Not much to bring such a keen look of gratification in Mrs. Mirfield’s usually inane face.

CHAPTER XXI.

DANGLING A PIECE OF MEAT BEFORE A HUNGRY DOG.

THE same Sunday that Mrs. George Mirfield was expecting her brother and Mr. Royston down to dinner, Charlotte and Molly went to morning service as usual, and—also as usual when the day was fine—were met by the two children on their way back from church.

This walk home from church was something of a triumphal procession for the family from the Fallow. Such a doffing of caps and dropping of courtseys saluted them from the top to the bottom of the village street, and the doffers and bobbers felt so neglected if their little civilities were not acknowledged, that it was quite an anxious time with the ladies, and they were in the habit of congratulating each other when they reached the shelter of the lodge gates and the ordeal was over.

On this particular Sunday their eyes and attention were as much occupied as usual, and so it fell out that they neither of them saw a shabby man who was standing at the stable-yard gate at the village inn, as they passed by. Had Molly but caught a glimpse of him, much that followed would have fallen out very differently.

It was rather surprising that they did not notice him, for he was a stranger, and strangers were rather rare commodities at Cramlingford, especially on Sunday mornings. Not that he tried in any way to court their attention; indeed, after one quick, searching glance at them he seemed to rather shrink back behind the shelter of the wooden gates, as if he would avoid being seen. It was perhaps a natural impulse this desire to hide himself, for if the truth be told there was something horribly incongruous between his appearance and his surroundings. His drink-sodden countenance and generally disreputable exterior looked painfully out of place among the respectable Cramlingford folk, in all the bravery of their Sunday best. The pallid flaccidity of his countenance and the ingrained grime of his attire were so palpably the results of a stived-

up city existence, under more than usually unwholesome circumstances, that his very presence there, amid the brilliant, undimmed sunshine, the untainted breeze from the moorlands, and the bright-skinned, cleanly Yorkshire rustics, was a spot of pollution on the vivid brightness of the picture.

It was comprehensible enough that he should shrink out of sight at the approach of the stream of church-goers, and that in spite of his evident curiosity concerning some of them.

After that quick, keen glance at the party from the Fallow, and the subsequent shrinking behind the gate, he turned to one of the lads who, in all the glory of spotless shirt-sleeves and shining faces, were lounging about the yard with their hands in their pockets, in full enjoyment of their Sunday morning rest.

"Who are the swells?" he asked, and there was that in his manner of putting the question which suggested that it was only put for form's sake, or perhaps to make assurance doubly sure; "the two ladies with the children and the nurse?"

The boy nearest him lounged forward through the open gate and looked up the street before he answered.

"That's the family from Netley Fallow," he said. "Lady Mirfield and the Honorable Mrs. Arthur Mirfield; and the little lad is the Lord Netley that will be when the old earl has gone off the hooks."

"And an uncommonly good-looking family, too, I call it," returned the unclean-looking stranger. "It isn't often you see such a handsome lot among the aristocracy. The old earl has got reason to bless himself for the good taste of his sons. Both dead, aren't they?"

"Yes," answered the stable lad; "both died within a week of one another. Lord Netley has never held up his head since."

"Poor old chap!" said the other, and shambled carelessly away, attracted probably by the sound of clinking glasses inside the house, which betokened the opening of the bar.

Molly seldom went to church on Sunday afternoon; she got out of the second service as often as she could, for she had a habit of slipping into the children's nursery after

luncheon and telling them stories, while the two nurses went for an hour's chat in the servants' hall. It was about the only time that she ever got the small people quite to herself, and it would have been difficult to say which of the trio enjoyed it most.

"You need not come up until I ring," she would say to the delighted young women, and it often happened that Charlotte came home from afternoon service and found the three of them still squatting on the nursery hearth-rug, grown a little quiet and sleepy by this time, but all of them exceedingly happy.

She found them like this on her return from church on this particular Sunday afternoon, and she seated herself in a rocking-chair near by, and took off her gloves and loosened her wrappings, with the manner of a person who settles herself for a good spell.

"I've had something of an adventure this afternoon, Molly," she said, and Molly, at the tone, lifted a tousled head and a scorched pair of cheeks to look sleepily at her.

"An adventure?" she repeated. "I hope it was a nice one, Lotte."

"Well, no, it was not; not what one would call exactly nice—especially happening so directly on Abney's declaration. A man followed me up the drive this afternoon to beg, and he founded his claim to my generosity on—what do you think? On his faithful service to poor Lionel on board his yacht!"

Molly stroked the baby heads on her knee tenderly two or three times before she spoke.

"Well, seeing that you were never on board the yacht in your life, I hardly see that that gave him much claim on you," she said then, gently.

"Perhaps not—much," agreed Charlotte. "But I had to give him a ten-pound note."

"Oh, Lotte!"

"Well, my dear, he preached me such a long sermon about the want he and his wife were in. But the worse part of it is that I don't believe a word of his story. I don't believe he was ever steward on board poor Lionel's boat; I don't believe he ever had anything to do with Lionel at all."

"But why?" asked Molly, looking up with an increase of interest.

"Well, his manner was so odd, so flustered. He said he had seen me once or twice in the village with the little brown-haired lady—by which, I suppose, he meant you, my dear—and he had been under the impression that you were Lady Mirfield."

"And again why, Lotte?"

"He did not say why, but he explained that he had only that moment discovered his mistake. He asked at the lodge if there was any chance of getting a quiet word or two with Lady Mirfield, and they pointed me out to him on the drive, a few yards in front of him."

"What was he like, Lotte?"

"Oh, a horrible-looking person, with bloodshot eyes and smelling of brandy."

"What was he doing here in Cramlingford? Did he come on purpose to levy blackmail on you?"

"I suppose so; he waited while I got the money and sent it down to him. He told me he wanted to get back to Leeds to-night."

"Why to Leeds?"

"I understood he had some friends there."

"Well," said Molly, "my impression is that you have been swindled, my dear. I don't believe he ever had anything to do with Lord Mirfield at all. Take my advice, Lotte, if he turns up again, refer him to Abney; he saw all the crew of your husband's yacht. If the man writes to you, or tries to see you again, place the matter in Abney's hands, without a word of warning to the man himself. Abney will see justice done all round."

She got up from her hot seat on the rug as she finished, and pushed the hair off her face, as if she had rather overdone the roasting process.

"Yes," said Lady Mirfield, rising too, "I suppose that will be the best plan. But if he really is not the person he pretends to be, the chances are that he will be afraid to try to trick me again. How shamefully you have burned your face, Molly!"

But Molly went off to her room with some laughing re-

mark about a roasting more or less not being of much consequence in her case.

She dropped her smiles, however, when she was alone, and it was a very anxious face that looked back at her from the toilet glass.

"Strange this man should turn up here so soon after that letter about Philpott," she murmured. "It is true enough that troubles never come singly. I wonder, if it is really he, what will happen next? Did I speak strongly enough about her not seeing him again? I'm afraid not; but I get so afraid of overdoing it."

She sighed a very tired sigh as she turned away and began to make her preparations for dinner.

And at that same moment Mrs. Mirfield and her brother, having shown Mr. Royston to his room, were holding a council of war, in which this self-styled steward of Lord Mirfield's figured prominently.

The mysterious stranger mentioned in her telegram had arrived at Cramlingford three days ago, and was staying at the village inn. Every evening he sat and drank in the parlor with the village trades-people and the farm hands from the neighborhood. Nobody had been able to find out what was the business that had brought him to the place, nor his name, nor how long he was likely to stay. He was an elderly man, and seemed in very delicate health, and drank heavily.

"Our man, sure enough," chuckled Borthwicke. "Not that I should think Philpott is an elderly man in reality, but I expect the pace he has gone at has made him look more than his age. The thing now is, how to get him and Royston face to face. Once I am sure of my man I will trot him up to call upon his wife, and see how George's chance for the earldom looks then. Now, what is the best plan for getting these two men together?"

On this point Mrs. Mirfield had no suggestions to offer, and there seemed to be no other way but to cajole Royston into the parlor of the public-house and trust to circumstances.

"I must trot him down the village street after dinner, and have a convenient touch of colic on the way back, and go in for a drop of brandy. He's one of your starchy old

parties. Short of saving a man from sudden death, he would make a strong objection to stepping over the door-sill of a village public-house."

When Mrs. Mirfield heard the pretext on which Royston had been dragged down to Yorkshire she looked uncomfortable, but the intrepid Clem begged her not to disturb herself.

"I never got myself into a fix yet that I could not find a way out of," he said, and proceeded to explain to her his plan for extricating them both from their present predicament. "There is that advantage about a fairy-story, don't you see you know, Alice"—they were getting quite cordial under the influence of a mutual interest—"when it has served its turn it is easily got rid of."

Royston was still busy removing the soil and dust of the journey when Borthwicke knocked at his door.

Clem had already got into his dinner-coat; it was a less elaborate process with him than with Royston, who was even bestowing more pains than usual on his personal adornment, out of compliment to his hostess.

Borthwicke came into the room with an air of caution and mystery, and closed the door carefully behind him, and waited to speak till he had crossed the room.

"A great calamity has happened," he said in a discreetly lowered voice. "My sister is in an awful state of mind about it. We have dragged you down all this long distance for nothing. Mrs. Mirfield got a letter from India last night, too late to wire me, in answer to one of hers. The Mr. Royston she has been looking for is found."

"Oh, is he?" said Royston quietly. "Well, that places me in a very awkward position, my dear Mr. Borthwicke. I am here, a guest in your sister's house, under false pretences, don't you see?"

"Oh, that be hanged!" exclaimed Clem, with effusion. "Alice feels that she is the guilty party; she is ready to knock her head against the wall with vexation for having put you to so much trouble. She blames herself for not waiting until the Indian mail was in before she communicated with you."

"I hope Mrs. Mirfield will do nothing of the kind. Please make her understand that it would not give me the

least gratification to see her knock her head against the wall, and, if it will be of any comfort to her to know it, tell her that in undertaking the journey I was far more influenced by the thought of seeing my old friend Netley than by the hope of this legacy."

"Ah, well, we shall be able to manage that for you at all events," Borthwicke answered. "We are at the gates of Netley Fallow now. The house is barely five minutes' walk from here. We will go up after breakfast in the morning, and we must do the best we can for you meantime. Alice will be delighted to have a chat with somebody straight from town. It is a great deprivation to her to spend the whole year round in this quiet place, but her son has left her no alternative."

When Royston had the room to himself again he resumed his toilet operations, and for a few minutes went steadily forward; and then, in the most critical moment of all, in the middle of fixing his tie, a sudden thought occurred to him and brought the performance to an abrupt stop, leaving him staring in a fixed, absent-minded fashion at his own pleasant reflection in the glass.

This fussy, restless, bustling little Mr. Borthwicke had spoken of a letter arriving by the Indian mail last night—Saturday night—"too late for his sister to wire to him." But the Indian mails arrived in London on Wednesday, and by no possibility could a letter take from Wednesday to Saturday night to travel from London to Yorkshire.

Why had Mr. Borthwicke told him this lie? The letter had certainly not arrived by the Indian mail. Perhaps it had not arrived at all. If one part of the tale was false the rest might certainly be so too. Perhaps even the whole story of the old will and the reversionary interest was a concoction from beginning to end! There was assuredly something wrong somewhere, or it would not have been found necessary to put him off this legacy business with a deliberate falsehood. There was a most undeniable element of mystery in the affair; what it was he could not conceive for the life of him. Why this little squib of a man, and his altogether too magnificent sister, should have gone out of their way to bring him all this distance was an enigma.

From mere force of long-continued habit he had become one of the most conventional and methodical of men; he had grown to have an inveterate dislike for anything out of the common, and it provoked him to feel he was being mixed up in an affair which had some hidden motive behind it.

But he was not the kind of man to betray his thoughts. When he joined his hostess in her really elegant little drawing-room—a marvellous arrangement in soft shades and half tones—there was nothing in his manner to lead anybody to suppose that he was very much on his guard. Nevertheless his eyes and ears were mentally very much wider open than usual, and he felt dissatisfied with himself when he regained his room, at the end of the evening, without having made the smallest advance toward elucidating the mystery.

When Mrs. Mirfield had heard her guest's door close behind him she joined her brother in the dining-room, where the two men had gone for their refreshers after bidding her good-night.

She saw at once that Clem was in one of his most irritable moods. She saw, too, how recklessly the whiskey had been spilled on her polished table, and the cigar-ash strewn on her exquisite sideboard, and groaned in spirit.

Clem turned his head at the sound of the opening door, without lifting his feet off the back of the chair in front of him.

"Oh, it's you," he said; "come to hear the report of the evening's doings, I suppose? Well, the whole thing has gone to the devil—right to the devil! I schemed my attack of colic all right—did the whole thing beautifully—got him into the inn parlor among the whole lot of them, and found our bird flown! I got a quiet word with the landlord, and put the question straight to him if he had any strangers in the house, and he told me he had had one since Thursday, but he had left again this evening to go to Leeds, where he had some relations. I am in the devil's own temper about it. To think that I should have gone to all this trouble for nothing! You can make up your mind to one thing—all these vexations and disappointments will go down at so much per head in your bill of costs, Mrs. Mirfield."

Mrs. Mirfield tried to smile, and failed. She was playing the part of mouse to Clem's cat again, and, in his present delightful mood, she had to accept his pats and scratches with as much outward amiability as she could command.

The next day began with one of those exquisite autumn mornings when the grass gleams under its burden of dew-drops, as if there had been a shower of diamonds in the night, when the atmosphere is heavy with the pungent odor of rotting leaves, and a soft haze gives to distant objects a tender, purplish tint, which makes them filmy and semi-transparent and beautiful exceedingly.

The moment breakfast was over Mrs. Mirfield put on her bonnet, and escorted her visitors up the main drive to the house.

"The earl is never visible until eleven," she told Mr. Royston; "but Mrs. Arthur is an early riser, and she won't be likely to stand upon ceremony with an old friend like you. We shall most likely find her on the ladies' lawn, at the side of the house. You will have plenty to talk about until the earl is ready to receive you."

"I am afraid you are making too sure of my welcome," returned Royston deprecatingly. "I don't know that Mrs. Arthur Mirfield ever looked upon me as an especially close friend of hers."

"Oh, I prophesy she will be enchanted to see you," she answered. "You are the first acquaintance whom she has ever received at the Fallow. She will be glad enough to own so presentable a friend."

Royston felt there was more spite in this speech than was conveyed in the bare words. After all, he was not enjoying the prospect of this visit to his old friend as he had expected to. For one thing, he was not happy in his present company. He rather flinched at the idea of calling upon ladies in company with Mr. Borthwicke—especially Mr. Borthwicke in his present snappish temper—and Mrs. Mirfield's grand manners were almost as unpleasant to submit to as the entire want of all manner in her brother.

The punctilious elderly gentleman had gathered that this was to be Clem's first appearance in Lord Netley's house—Mrs. Mirfield would have left him behind if he

would have allowed it—and he felt it was something little short of desecration to take such a man into such a house on a footing of equality. He could not help wondering what Netley would think of the uncouth little animal.

He would have been more comfortable had he known that Mrs. Mirfield had hurried the visit forward, on purpose that a meeting between her brother and her brother-in-law might be avoided. Lord Netley never got down to the ground-floor during the first half of the day now. If he received Mr. Royston at all he would receive him in his study upstairs.

Mrs. Mirfield took her way to the main entrance. She would have liked to show Royston how thoroughly at home she was by going round directly by a side path to the little side door near the morning parlor; but with Clem in the party she felt this was a little more than she dared to do. Charlotte was too truly the great lady to trouble herself about small things, as a rule; but she was very scathing when she did rouse herself to resent a liberty, and she would certainly so have resented Mr. Clement Borthwicke's introduction on a footing of familiarity into a house of which she was the nominal mistress.

So it was by the large double glass doors leading into the big, shadowy hall that Mrs. Mirfield entered the house, followed by her two male companions.

The hall led right through the house, opening at its lower end on to the quadrangle at the back, formed by the main front and wings, where the tennis courts and croquet lawns were. More than half-way down its great length huge screens had been placed across, partly to lessen the rush of air in stormy weather, partly to cut off the lower end and form it into a large parlor, where tea was served when a large number of people were playing tennis. The space had not been put to this use for a long time past now, but the screens still stood there, and it was from behind these screens that Mrs. Mirfield heard Charlotte's and Molly's laughter as she looked round the hall for somebody to take in her name.

She signed to the two gentlemen to wait, and went forward.

The two ladies were there, dressed for walking, and Mar-

cus Kelper, back from cub-hunting, was sitting on a sturdy-legged black oak table, reciting his morning's experience for their edification. He was the only one of the party who saw Mrs. Mirfield until she had reached their side, the others being too busy with their amusement over something he had said to notice her approach.

"An unearthly hour to pay a visit, is it not?" she said, as she shook hands. "But I have brought my excuse with me, in the person of a very old friend of the earl, who is anxious to pay his respects before leaving for town again."

Kelper's eyes twinkled as they met Molly's behind Charlotte's back; he was chuckling over the little back-handed smack at himself.

"A friend of grandpapa's?" said Charlotte, moving a step or two toward the opening in the screens; "where is he?"

"It is a Mr. Philip Royston," Mrs. Mirfield answered, with feminine inconsequence. "He came down with my brother, Charlotte, and I have brought them both. Clem was so anxious to see the house."

"Royston!" cried Marcus Kelper to Molly, with a dash of surprise. They two were left standing by the oaken table under the high window, while Charlotte received her callers. "Did you hear what Mrs. Mirfield said? It is Mr. Royston!"

"Royston?" Molly repeated, saying the name in the manner of a person who is trying to recall some long-forgotten memory. "Ought I to know him?"

"Have you forgotten the name of your own father?" he asked lightly. "It is the man who gave you away when you were married. Here he comes. Look—don't you remember him?"

But she did not look round as she was bidden. As Kelper spoke of Royston's presence at her marriage, her face flashed into a sudden waxen pallor, and her eyes went instinctively to the doors leading to the gardens; she even made an involuntary movement toward them, as if an irrepressible impulse of flight was urging her forward. But the voices of the group of people advancing from that side checked her, and turned her round abruptly toward Kelper again; and the look on her face as she swung round

haunted him for many a day afterward. It was the look of a hare when she feels the hot breath of the hound beating at the fur on her flank, the look of a trapped weasel when it hears the step of the keeper coming down the path through the wood, the look that comes into the eyes of any living creature when it knows its destruction is close at hand.

Kelper threw out his hand with an impulse of protection, though from what he was to protect her he had no idea. "What is it?" he whispered; but she did not hear him.

The poor, terrified eyes, dark with fear, glanced round the corner they were in, as if, cut off from escape, she would find some hole in which to hide herself; but the voices and steps of the approaching people were close behind her now, and she snatched despairingly at Kelper's outstretched hand and lurched a little forward.

What instinct prompted him he knew no more than a blade of grass knows why it struggles up to the light; but all his life long he congratulated himself on his behavior at that moment.

As she dipped forward in that sudden inertness he threw an arm round her and held her firmly.

"Now, you've hurt yourself terribly!" he exclaimed, speaking in a way to attract every one's attention. "I shouldn't wonder if you have sprained your ankle severely. Did you catch your foot in your gown, or was it a mere slip on the polish? Come over to the big chair in the corner there."

And without more ado he bore her, her feet scarcely touching the ground, to a large chair, set with its back to the light, in the darkest part of the hall. He saw that, for some reason or other, the meeting with this Mr. Royston was a great ordeal to her—saw, too, that she could not conquer her overmastering fear, and was afraid of the inquiry it would create; and he did the best he could for her.

"How did it happen, Molly, my child?" inquired Charlotte in quick concern, kneeling down by Molly's chair. "Do you think it is serious? Shall we get you upstairs? Is she going to faint, Marcus?"

For Molly made no answer, did not seem to be conscious that she had been addressed. She sat where they had put her, her face strained and rigid and white, looking over Charlotte's head at the tall, straight, slim figure of Mr. Royston. And, white and rigid as the rest of the face was, it seemed to Royston that there was an unspoken prayer in the dilated glance she fixed on him.

Clem Borthwicke, standing a little behind his sister and Royston, saw something curious in the glance too, and formed his own conclusions on the subject immediately.

It was a strange feeling that held them all silently immovable, for a space of time while one might with ease have counted ten. Molly white and still, in her dark corner, with both hands clasping the big carved elbows of her chair; Kelper anxious and watchful at her side; Charlotte kneeling by her, sorry for her suffering; and the other three people in the full light, Royston with a face as expressionless as a stone mask; Mrs. Mirfield superciliously incredulous of the whole thing; and Clem Borthwicke trying to keep a watch on every face in the room, his quick, small black eyes darting from face to face in unceasing vigilance, fearful lest the significance of a word or glance should escape him.

"Molly, my dear, speak to me!" said Charlotte again, shaking off the grim, bodeful influence of the moment. "Are you in such awful pain, dear girl?"

"Let me be your doctor, Mrs. Arthur Mirfield," said Royston, moving forward; and for some occult reason his quiet, calm, clear delivery relieved the inexplicable strain of the situation in an instant. "Let me communicate to you a little of my gladness at seeing you again. It will help you to bear the pain perhaps."

Molly watched him as he came toward her, never moved her eager glance from his face, and when he reached her she gave him a tremulous little hand to shake.

"I was glad to hear from Mr. Borthwicke that you were prosperous and happy," he went on, with just the right shade of gentle interest in his manner, "and that Lord Netley had taken you to his heart of hearts—you and the little boy too. It is so much better for you than having a

lonely home of your own. I hope I was not the cause of this misfortune—the twist to your foot?”

“It was only the wrench—for the moment,” she murmured, still looking at him in that curiously intent manner; “the pain has gone now.”

He smiled down into her uplifted eyes, and pressed her hand again before he let it go.

“See what an excellent doctor I am, Lady Mirfield,” he said, turning to Charlotte, who was still kneeling on the floor. “I have healed the hurt at a glance. But, at the same time, I think a cold-water bandage might be advisable to prevent future inconvenience.”

But Molly was not capable of going through with such a piece of humbug as all that, and held out sturdily against the bandage.

“It was the merest wrench,” she declared. “It is mere folly to bother about it. Please let us talk of something else.”

Charlotte was enraptured with Mr. Royston.

When Kelper had taken his departure—not without a very grateful glance from Molly’s sweet eyes, and a very warm shake of the hand—and word had been sent to Lord Netley of Mr. Royston’s arrival, they settled down for a quiet chat till his lordship should be ready to receive his visitor.

And Mr. Royston set himself resolutely to work to be pleasant, telling the two younger ladies little anecdotes of their husbands, and proving himself to be an altogether delightful person.

“I don’t remember ever meeting Arthur after his marriage,” he said; “he was very little in England, of course, which may account for it; but I saw Mirfield only a week or two before his death. I was staying with a sister of mine at some absurdly small fishing-village on the Cornish coast, and Mirfield’s yacht put in for fresh water and provisions; and when I heard whose yacht it was I took the liberty of going out to her and bidding Mirfield good-day. A charming form of pleasure, yachting, Lady Mirfield; you lost much by not being a good sailor. I little thought then, when poor Mirfield put his hand down over the side,

after I was in the dinghy, to give me a last grip, that it was to be my last sight of him. It must have been an awful thing for Netley, losing the two of them so near to one another."

"It does not bear talking about even now," Charlotte answered. "It made an old man of him at a breath! But for the comfort Molly and her boy brought into the house, I think the double blow would have been his death. Molly has played the part of family sunshine ever since she came to us, Mr. Royston. What we should all have done without her, during the first freshness of our trouble, I really can't imagine."

"You would have borne it just the same, my dear Charlotte," put in Mrs. Mirfield, with a disparaging glance in Molly's direction; but the remark fell flat, and Royston's next observation was a tacit attack on it.

"And Mrs. Arthur had her own trouble to bear, too, at the same time," he said. "But some women are born comforters. I don't know what some grief-burdened souls would do if it were not so."

When Royston had been summoned to his old colleague's presence, Clem Borthwicke tried to edge his way into the conversation, and, very much to his own surprise, found himself utterly at a loss.

Lady Mirfield was courtesy itself, and listened to him with the politest of attention; but although she listened she had nothing to say on the topics he introduced, and he found the task of supporting the conversation single-handed too much for him. He dropped the attempt after two or three failures of this kind, and transferred his attention to Molly; but that little person was not in a responsive mood, and, very much to his indignant disgust, he found the little "south side" burlesque artiste as difficult of approach as the "big swell."

He tried to feel amused at what he set down as her airs, but did not make much of a job of it. He might chuckle over her dignified little touch of reserve by-and-bye, and grin to himself at the prospect of taking her stuck-up pride down a peg or two, but while in her presence the thought did not give him the satisfaction it should have done; he was too keenly conscious of his own sense of discomfort.

He would have dearly liked to "take the starch out of her" there and then, by telling her that he had been down to "her old shop" once or twice lately, and asking her if she had any messages to send back to "her old pals;" but he recognized the fact that the game was not worth the candle. He would give her no hint that might arouse her suspicions of the Nemesis coming upon her, so he bore his discomfort in silence, and hugged his resentment for a future occasion.

Royston was upstairs the best part of an hour, and when he came down it was only to make his excuses to Mrs. Mirfield.

Lord Netley had pressed him so warmly to stay over the night that he had given in. His bag was already packed, would Mrs. Mirfield direct that it should be handed over to Lord Netley's servant when he called for it?

"I suppose you will be going up this afternoon, according to our original plan, Mr. Borthwicke," he said, when the other matter had been settled with his hostess. "I should like to have a few minutes' chat with you before we say good-day. Mrs. Mirfield will excuse us, I am sure. Will you walk down the drive with me?"

His manner was agreeableness itself, as he made the request, and his quietly amiable demeanor lasted until they were half-way between the house and the gates, well beyond sight and hearing.

Then he stopped suddenly and faced his companion, barring his way, and cutting without the slightest ceremony into the middle of what he was saying.

"Now, Mr. Borthwicke, I want to know, once for all, without any needless verbosity, what your object was in getting me down here?"

The abruptness of the attack took Clem off his guard for the moment. He ejaculated a feeble "Eh?" and stood looking at his questioner in blank astonishment. But his assurance was too elastic in quality not to recover itself immediately.

"What do you mean?" he asked, as the other was going to speak again. "What's up with you? What are you asking such a question as that for? You know what the mistake was that led me to ask you——"

"Drop that, please!" interrupted Royston. "I found out that lie for myself before I had been in your sister's house half an hour; only I did not choose to make a row under a lady's roof. Don't tell me any more damned nonsense about old wills and reversions! Be good enough to say what was your little game in enticing me into Lord Netley's house?"

"Oh, now I see what you're driving at!" cried Clem, giving his hat a more forward tip over his nose and sticking his hands in his pockets. "You didn't like Mrs. Arthur Mirfield's reception of you, and you're trying to make me responsible for the unpleasantness."

"I do hold you responsible," answered the other, growing more frigid and stately as Clem began to swagger. "I do hold you responsible, Mr. Borthwicke. It is very evident to me that you were aware of the effect my appearance would have upon the lady, and I should like to know why you dared to take such an unpardonable liberty with me as to make me the tool of your contemptible, underhanded little plans? Lord Netley has explained the situation to me, and I see the motive for your persecution of the young viscount's mother, but I don't see why you should draw me into your blackguardly attacks on a woman. I tell you plainly, Mr. Borthwicke, if I were ten years younger than I am—and I should not be a young man then—I would flog you till you could not stand for placing me in the position you did this morning."

He was white with suppressed rage, but he did not allow his anger to detract one iota from his dignity.

Clem laughed, to hide his sense of his own littleness. There was nothing for it now but to bounce it out to the end.

"There was no mistake about her funk," he said coarsely. "I knew the sprained foot was all bunkum. You must know something pretty bad against her for the sight of you to bowl her over like that."

"I know nothing whatever against Mrs. Arthur Mirfield," answered Royston, cooling down a little as the other's crass vulgarity asserted itself—it was absurd to expect any touch of decent feeling from a person of this type—"but don't please run away with the notion that I am defending the

lady to you. If I had known Mrs. Mirfield as a thief, a forger, or even a murderess, I should not feel it incumbent on me to help forward your attack on her by denouncing her as such to the authorities. It is possible that, if I knew her to be any of these things, I should be neglecting my duty as a loyal subject in holding my tongue, but in spite of that I should certainly remain silent. Nothing that she had done in the past could make it seem right to me to break up her present contentment, her present unselfish womanly existence."

"Claptrap!" muttered Clem, with an offensive curl of his lip.

"Of course it is, from your point of view," Royston answered, with an air of indulgence which the other found exceedingly irritating. "One does not expect gentlemen of your class to be able to understand anything so immeasurably above their own code of morals as honest reparation or repentance. And that brings me back to my own grievance again," he added, growing quieter and quieter as he went on. "If you wanted a bogie man to frighten that sweet, adorable little woman with, why did you not choose a man of your own kidney for the task? A man who isn't above bullying a defenceless woman, and one who doesn't mind how foul are the means he uses to accomplish his dirty purpose. In short, a mean, sneaking cur of your own type? Oh, don't shut your hands in that fashion. I can't fight, but I can fence still, and I tell you candidly I should not think it a bit *infra dig.* to crack a hound's crown with my stick if he showed his fangs at me."

And he looked very much as if he meant it, standing there straight and still and smiling, with his anger-lit eyes keenly watchful of the other's every movement.

"I am sorry that I am too old to give you the thrashing you deserve," he concluded, "but at any rate it is a satisfaction to have let you know my unbiassed opinion of you. I have the honor to wish you a very good morning, and a speedy journey back to your native haunts among the money-lenders and usurers, Mr. Clement Borthwicke."

He moved away with an elaborate bow, and walked off without a glance after the retreating figure that was hurrying along to the gates. He felt a righteous joy in hav-

ing said his say, but now that it was over his great anxiety was to remove all sign of anger before he got back to the house again, so he struck off down a side path, and took a little stroll about the park on his own account, and in this way missed seeing Mrs. Mirfield again. But he contrived to reconcile himself to this circumstance, in spite of his usual courtesy in such matters.

Mrs. George Mirfield had rather an uncomfortable time of it when she got back to luncheon that day. In all her experience of him she had never seen Clem in a such a flaming rage. He grumbled openly at the food, swore under his breath at the well-trained servants while they were in the room, and when they were gone poured out such a volley of blasphemy and abuse on everybody in general, and his sister in particular, that that fastidious lady sat at the other end of the table and shook in her skin.

"I am sorry now that I asked you to help me in the matter," she said tearfully, when she at last got a chance to edge in a word. "I would never have done it if I had known what I was bringing on myself. Let the whole business drop—I will pay you what you think fair for the time you have spent on it, and let it end."

"No, by ——!" he cried, bringing his hand down on the table with a thump which set the dainty porcelain dishes jingling, and made her nearly spring from her chair; "that is just what I won't do! I took the thing up because I saw a chance of making money out of it, but now I'd go on with it if there wasn't a brass ha'penny behind it. I'll show my condescending Lady Mirfield the sort of person she has been making a confidante of all this time; I'll let the ex-penny-gaff actress know the kind of man she played the haughty aristocrat to; I'll open Lord Netley's eyes to the character of the troll he has petted and befooled for the past year; and I'll show that —— old ramrod of a Royston that we can bring our fascinating little bigamist to her bearings, in spite of all his highfalutin' rot and rubbish. God! I could jump on him when I think of the things he said to me. And he knows all there is against that little impostor too—he almost confessed as much to my face—and defied me to get a word out of him. That was why she was so upset at the sight

of him. She thought he was going to show her up. Her foot was no more hurt than mine was. Think of it! To know he has got the information we want and not to be able to get it out of him! It's like dangling a piece of meat before a hungry dog. Bad enough for the dog, but a cussedly dangerous game for the dangler, as he may find out to his cost. If it's their turn to-day it may be mine to-morrow; and you may trust me, my dear madam, to keep the exact score against 'em all, and to have back every ha'penny, with full interest, for all they've taken out of me to-day. —— the whole lot of 'em, root and branch!"

With which graceful peroration Mr. Borthwicke pushed his chair violently back from the table, and strode out through the back door into the neat garden. And for the next hour Mrs. Mirfield had the fearful satisfaction of watching him from behind the lace curtains of her sanctum, ramping up and down her lawn of velvet, hatching deep plans of revenge, and driving home his points now and again with vicious digs of his heel at the beautifully kept turf, as if, in his present unearthly mood, it was a positive need to him to feel that he was harming something, even if it was only a few blades of unoffending grass.

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. MIRFIELD TAKES AN INDEPENDENT STEP.

MR. CLEMENT BORTHWICKE did not go back to town that day after all. He went down to the inn in the evening and had a long chat with the landlord—much to his sister's annoyance. She knew Clem's free and easy manners with people of that class, and felt it derogatory to her dignity that her brother should be seen hobnobbing with honest old Dick Redhead. But in Clem's present temper she did not dare to offer a remonstrance; there was nothing for it but to leave him to his own sweet will.

So he interviewed the rustic boniface, and if he got very

little reliable information from him concerning the mysterious stranger who had gone to see his relations in Leeds, he made one discovery which promised to be of use in the future.

The shabby, hard-drinking old gentleman had expressed his intention of returning before Christmas for another short stay in Cramlingford. Clem seized on this information with avidity.

"I'll give you twenty pounds if you get me down here in time to have a talk with him!" he said. "I don't want to do him a bit of harm; I only want his evidence on a certain matter which I can't establish without his help. If you'll wire me the news of his arrival, and I get down in time to see him, I'll pay you down twenty golden sovereigns with more pleasure than I ever paid money away in my life before."

And Mr. Redhead promised to do his best to earn the money.

Clem went to London the next day by the afternoon express. He did the drive to York in Mr. Redhead's tax-cart, and got to the station with twenty minutes to spare.

As he stood on the pavement, fumbling in his pocket for a piece of silver of exactly the right size to give to the driver, he saw that honest worthy touch his cap, with a broad smile of recognition, to a gentleman who was passing; and turning to look more particularly at him, he recognized the tall, dark-eyed man, with a shaven face, who had passed him at the gates of the Redcross Asylum on Saturday morning.

In an instant it flashed across him who it must be, and though, for his own after-satisfaction, he asked the question, he knew the answer beforehand.

"So that is Lord Netley's secretary, is it?" he said, with an elaborate show of carelessness. "Garth, do you call him? Abney Garth, eh? I suppose he's almost as great a man as his lordship himself among the Cramlingford people?"

"Well, they do say, sir," answered the lad, in a broad Yorkshire dialect, lowering his voice cautiously as he uttered the treason, "them as should know most about it do say as it's Mr. Garth as writes the translations, an' his

lordship as gits the praise. Our parson ses as Mr. Garth is powerful clever, an' that he's just keeping his light under a bushel to let himself be tied down to the old earl's apron-strings as he is."

Mr. Borthwicke chuckled in an internal fashion peculiar to him.

"So it's Mr. Garth as writes the translations, is it?" he said. "Well, it strikes me Mr. Garth will have an opportunity to get away from the earl's apron-strings before he is much older; and it may even happen that he will have the time and the opportunity to do a considerable amount of translations on his own account, and under such circumstances, too, as will let all the world know that he did 'em without help from the old earl or any one else."

And he walked off to the booking-office, leaving the rustic Jehu very much exercised in his own mind as to the meaning of the mystic speech.

Mr. Borthwicke had plenty of food for thought during his journey back to town. So Mr. Abney Garth was in the hunt after Mr. Philpott too! It was a fair case of "Hunt the Thimble," and the question had now resolved itself into a matter of chance. Whoever spotted the thimble—*i.e.* Philpott—first would cry checkmate to the other side—Garth, by putting him right out of the way, where nobody would have a chance of coming across him; Clem, by producing him boldly at Netley Fallow, and declaring the relationship between him and Mrs. Arthur.

Clem saw that, as things stood now, Garth had rather the better chance.

When Philpott turned up again at Cramlingford, and opened communications with Molly, she would put Garth on to him, and the obnoxious husband would be got out of the way without loss of time. Clem's only opportunity lay in the chance that Philpott might not make his presence known to Mrs. Arthur immediately on his arrival. This would give Clem time to get down from London before Garth knew the drunken reprobate was in the place. To further this chance, he wrote a short note to Redhead during the journey: "When the man we were speaking of last night arrives at Cramlingford again," he wrote, "if you can induce him to stay quietly out of sight at the inn

until my arrival, I will double the twenty pounds I promised you."

When Mrs. Mirfield saw her brother pass out of her gates, bag in hand, and knew she was rid of him for the time being, she heaved a sigh of relief. What the visit had been to her she could not have described to anybody. With all her love for George, and her ambition to see him step into the shoes of the ailing old man up at the Fallow, when they should be vacated by their present wearer, she felt that nothing short of the prospect of immediately establishing George's claim could reconcile her to a repetition of Clem's visit. Perhaps, of all she had gone through in the last two days, nothing was harder to bear than the consciousness that she had lost caste in the eyes of her servants. She knew, too, how those admirable creatures discussed the shortcomings of their betters among themselves, and, with her passion for effect and appearances, she shrank, with a shrinking that was almost agony, from the idea of Clem's little peculiarities being so discussed.

At the thought of another experience like that at the luncheon-table yesterday—open fault-finding with the dishes, muttered oaths at the servants, violent railing at herself—her flesh fairly crept on her bones, and she began to cast about for a means of avoiding it.

What if she went straight up to Molly now—Abney Garth was expected back this afternoon; she must go at once if at all—suppose she went boldly up to Mrs. Arthur, accused her to her face of all her enormities, and threatened to go at once to the earl and tell him everything unless she undertook to leave the Fallow at once, throw up her boy's claim, and keep out of the way until the earl's death?

It was such a desperate scheme that, when she had fairly put it into shape, it took her breath away, and yet, as she began to grow familiarized to the idea, it lost some of its impracticability, until at last she became enamored of it and started out to put it into action at once.

Mrs. Molly Philpott might be too sharp for her at fencing and word-play, but when it came to hard and fast accusations she rather thought she could hold her own.

And, as an untoward fate would have it, she caught

Molly, utterly defenceless and alone, in the large drawing-room at the Fallow.

Charlotte was paying a round of calls, from which Molly had been absolved on account of her imaginary sprain.

"It won't do you any good to spend the afternoon getting in and out of the carriage," Charlotte had said when Molly proposed to accompany her. "I know what you are. You are fond enough of coddling up other people, but you won't take a bit of care of yourself. And, besides, you will like to have a chat with Abney when he arrives."

So she had stayed, feeling a veritable impostor. Lord Netley was too well occupied with Mr. Royston—who did not go up until the night train—to need her company, and so it happened that she was sitting alone by the fire in the big *salon*, watching the dancing flames through the glass fire-screen, and looking slighter and more girlish than usual amid the magnificence of the big room, when Mrs. George Mirfield was shown in to her.

The mellow autumn sunlight was streaming in at the five tall windows; one patch fell across the little figure curled up in the large chair, burnishing her brown hair till it shone like gold seen through a veil; and Mrs. Mirfield noticed, in spite of her mind being very full of other matters just then, that the small face had lost some of its roundness, that the outline of the cheek was sharper than it had been when she had left the Fallow in the summer.

"Combined effects of fear and conscience," she said to herself viciously, and went straight away at her victim, hoping to break down her defence by the suddenness of the onslaught. And the poor little woman, already demoralized by the memory of what she had gone through yesterday, did for a time go down before it.

"I am glad you are alone," began the elder woman, moving the chair she had chosen quite close up to Molly's, "because if you had not been I should have had to ask you to grant me a private interview, and that would have created remark; and in the present state of matters, for your sake, I would avoid that as long as possible. I have come to speak to you very candidly about your position here"—she was hurrying along as if she knew exactly the extent of her own courage, knew that she had no reserve fuel, that

if she did not get over all her ground during her first burst, she would not be able to keep her speed up afterward—"and to point out to you the advisability of getting out of it while you can do it with safety."

"With safety?" echoed Molly faintly, lifting her pretty, tired eyes wonderingly to the other's implacable gaze.

But Mrs. Mirfield did not hear nor heed, in her anxiety to get out all she wanted to say before her spurious valor failed her.

"Things have come out about your life before you were known as Arthur Mirfield's wife"—Molly made a terrified exclamation, and half rose from her chair and dropped back again—"things which make it impossible for you to remain here much longer in any case. And I tell you frankly that, if you are still here when the final crash comes, I for one shall not be inclined to show you much mercy. If nobody else does it, I shall take steps against you for conspiracy and fraud, on my son's account, not to speak of the heavier charge which may be brought against you by your husband."

Molly was past even exclaiming now; she simply sat and listened, with quickened breath and parted lips. And, seeing her so stricken and prostrate, the assaulting party grew more daring and arrogant.

"I say nothing of that shameful, low-lived past of yours, because a delicate-minded person naturally shrinks from the discussion of such matters, and there will be quite enough talk about it when the facts of the case come to be publicly known, without any anticipation of the general outcry from me. What I have to do with is your present fraudulent conduct, your brazen assurance in coming here and trying to pass off that most unfortunate child of yours as Lord Netley's heir, to the exclusion of my son. How a person with such a history as yours should dare to thrust herself into a nobleman's family circle, and make herself at home there, as you have done, I cannot understand! It is simply the most appalling piece of presumption I have met with in my experience. The insolent audacity of the whole proceeding quite takes my breath away!"

And she paused, literally breathless, but whether with

horror at Molly's iniquities or from the effects of her own declamatory efforts is a question admitting of argument.

She paused, and Molly still waited, as if not sure that she had finished all she wanted to say. The first look of downright terror on Molly's face had gradually given place to something a little less distraught. Fear there was still, and very real fear, but there was less of absolute fright.

"I am glad you have said this to me," she said, when she saw that Mrs. Mirfield meant to allow her to speak, "very glad indeed! I have known for a long time past that you were my enemy, and I would rather have an open enemy than a secret one. Will you tell me exactly what you want me to do? Would it satisfy you if I consented to go away from here forever?"

Mrs. Mirfield's black eyes sparkled with the anticipation of coming triumph. To think that, after all their labor, the thing was to be so easily managed by a few direct accusations.

"Yes," she answered eagerly, "yes, I would be satisfied with that."

"I wonder," said Molly, speaking scarcely above a whisper, and looking round the room with a glance that was full of unconscious pathos, "I wonder if I could do it? I wonder how it would seem to be an outcast and a wanderer again, without a secure resting-place for the sole of my foot, without home or name or a friend to care whether one was well or ill, wretched or happy? I wonder if I have the courage and the strength of will to voluntarily brave such an existence after the peace and comfort of this? I wonder can I do it?"

"If you don't do it voluntarily," broke in the other woman harshly, "you may be quite sure that, sooner or later, you will do it under compulsion."

"It would be a wrench," Molly went on, apparently unconscious that any one had spoken; "it would be an awful wrench; and yet I have always said to myself that I would do even that if it came to the trial, rather than give in. But it would be hard—oh, very hard! To part with Artie now would be like plucking my heart itself out of its place——"

"But Artie would go with you, of course!" interjected Mrs. Mirfield hurriedly. "What would be the point of your going and leaving him behind? Artie must go too!"

"No, I can't do that," Molly answered, lifting her eyes again, with a new touch of courage, to the other's face; "I can't do anything against my boy, Mrs. Mirfield. Why should you want him sent away? He has not shown any shameless audacity nor appalling presumption, and he has no low past to live down. What harm can an innocent little child of four years of age do you by remaining here with his grandfather? Think of the cruelty to the poor old man! I will give up my own position here for the sake of peace; but the boy must stay as long as his grandfather wants him. There will be time enough to talk of his removal when the next Lord Netley takes possession of his own."

"But I don't think you are in a position to make your own terms, Mrs. Philpott." Molly gave a little cry at the use of that name, and glanced affrightedly round the room. "If you wish to avoid the odium of a public exposure you must accept the conditions offered to you. The child must go with you—on that point I am determined."

"Then I'm afraid I shall have to refuse your conditions and risk the alternative," Molly replied. She was desperately alarmed; she did not make any attempt to hide it, but in the matter of taking the boy away from Netley Fallow she had evidently nailed her colors to the mast, and would go down fighting to the last gasp. "Myself I am willing to sacrifice, but I can't do anything that may tell against my little son in the time to come."

Mrs. Mirfield rose majestically, with a big rustle and rattle of silken skirts and bead ornaments, and Molly rose, too, not one whit defiant—a little touch of pleading rather in her air—but to the full as determined as her adversary.

"Very well, then; there is of course nothing more for me to say. I have done my duty in warning you; the rest remains with you."

"Yes," said Molly, very quietly, "and it is likely to be a most disastrous rest; but that can't be helped. I would do a great deal, a very great deal, to avoid this exposure, to

even put it off until Lord Netley is beyond the reach of all the scandal and gossip it will occasion, but I can't stand in my boy's light, Mrs. Mirfield."

"But it must come about, sooner or later! When everything is known, the child must go. You don't suppose Lord Netley will allow him to remain here when the whole truth comes out."

"The whole truth!" cried Molly, with a sudden warm flash in her eyes, and a sudden lifting of her little figure. It seemed for a moment as if she was going to hurl a vehement declaration at the haughty, overweening woman opposite her, but in the very accomplishment of the impulse she pulled herself up and turned away, and leaned her head down on her arm on the mantelpiece, and began to cry a little. "I beg your pardon," she muttered brokenly. "I am sorry I'm so silly, but I think I am a little tired, I have been so worried lately. I wish, Mrs. Mirfield," she went on, speaking tremulously, in little disjointed sentences, "oh, *how* I wish I could persuade you to drop your persecution of me and my boy, if only for a time—until—until Lord Netley is not here to be distressed by it—by the *esclandre*! You think I am only begging this favor for myself, but I am begging it quite as much for him—for that poor old man, who was so disappointed in his sons. Won't you let him go down to his grave in peace? Won't you leave me alone till he is gone? I don't think you will have long to wait. If I could only explain things to you—but I dare not; it is not my secret alone. You will do a fearful amount of harm if you go on, but I don't suppose any word of mine will hinder you. You must go your own cruel way to the end and; then, and then, when you see the ruin and misery you have caused, you will perhaps feel a little compunction at the results of your handiwork."

"I'll risk that!" she said, with a contemptuous laugh. "I'll risk it, in spite of all your tragic acting. You really do it very well, but you must think me a very silly woman if you imagine for a moment that I should allow your dramatic little display to stop my efforts on my son's behalf—my efforts to secure the title and estates to their——"

"You will fail in that!" cried Molly, lifting her head

again; "mark my words, Mrs. Mirfield, you will fail in that! There is an obstacle in the way——"

"Which I will overcome," interposed Mrs. Mirfield, cutting into the middle of the sentence impatiently, "which I will overcome, if brains and money can do it. Good-day, Mrs. Philpott. Take my advice, and think over the matter again when I am gone, and reconsider your decision. Good-day."

When she was left alone again, Molly flitted about from spot to spot in the room for some minutes, taking up things and setting them down again in an aimless fashion which told of absolute preoccupation.

"Think over the matter again!" It was a quite needless injunction; she was not likely to think much of anything else for some time to come. The threatened exposure stood ahead of her like a grim spectre, which refused to be shut out of her mental vision whatever else might share her meditations with it.

She went out to the hall presently and spoke to one of the men waiting there, giving orders that Mr. Garth should be brought to her at once when he arrived, and then she returned to her purposeless perambulations among the furniture in the drawing-room. She thought once of sending to the nursery for the children, but decided against it directly; in the present turmoil of her mind their chatter would irritate rather than soothe her.

When the soft distant-toned clock on the bracket in the corner struck four she compelled herself to stillness for a minute or two, while the servants brought in the tea; in her present dangerous position it behoved her to make no false step on her own part. She would not even give Lord Netley's head footman the chance of going downstairs and saying that she was agitated by Mrs. George Mirfield's visit.

She composed herself gracefully in a low chair near one of the windows, and sat gazing out at the beds of multi-colored chrysanthemums which were already beginning to brighten into blossom in the borders round the ladies' lawn.

When the men had been and gone, and left her silent and solitary again, she leaned forward and rested her ach-

ing forehead against the cool window-pane, and continued her meditations there; and that was how Garth found her when he came in straight from his journey to her.

In the midst of her own distress it struck her how young he had grown in these last few days.

"Charlotte went out on purpose," she told him, in reply to his quick, eager look round the room. It was evident that this was to be no lukewarm courtship; having once broken away from its silent bondage, his passion was bound to show itself in all its natural vehemence. "She knew you were seeing after my business in town as well as your own, and she thought I should like a quiet half-hour's chat with you; so she absented herself, like the darling she is. I need not ask you how your own business has turned out, Abney; you look brimming over with good fortune."

"Yes, things have gone well with me," he answered; "but we can talk of that later on. What is wrong with you? Your nerves are all to pieces; I never saw you in such a state. What is it?"

"The end is coming," she said, with a small smile, "that is all. I told you, when I went away in the summer, that my departure was the beginning of the end, and I was right. Mrs. Mirfield has been here this afternoon, and openly declared her knowledge of the Philpott business, and addressed me as 'Mrs. Philpott.' And yesterday she and her brother brought me face to face with a man who knows everything—a Mr. Royston, who stood by poor Arthur at the time of his marriage, and an old friend of grandpapa's into the bargain. I was never so near fainting in my life, Abney—I don't think I have once left off trembling since."

"But what happened?" asked Garth eagerly. "I am all at sea! You say Mrs. Mirfield called you Mrs. Philpott just now! Then they could not have known what they were doing when they confronted you with this Royston."

"I don't think they knew all, but they must have known part, else why did they pounce him down on me like that? And he behaved well, Abney—beautifully! I was the only one who showed any agitation."

"Do you mean that he kept his own counsel?"

"Yes; looked me calmly in the face and said he was glad to hear I had been prosperous and happy. Abney, it was awful! I thought it was all out at last. I expected one or two sharp questions, and then I imagined how Charlotte would shrink away from me in loathing, and how Lord Netley would look at me as he listened to the story of my imposture. Oh, it was horrible!"

"Royston must be a good fellow."

"Yes; I think he was sorry for me".

"I should think he was," said Garth, with a pitying look at her face. "This has taken us a good deal by surprise. So Mrs. Mirfield has put a brother of hers on the job. Well, I must redouble my efforts to get hold of Philpott. I don't think they can do any real positive harm without him. I traced him to a large pauper lunatic asylum, and there I lost him. The doctor told me he was dying fast when he left there."

"Dying! Oh, don't tell me about it, Abney! It is so awful to wish any one dead, and it is so difficult not to wish him safely at rest, beyond doing further harm to himself or any one else."

"Poor little woman," Abney said gently, but she put up her hands at that in sudden, swift repudiation of his sympathy.

"You must not pity me!" she cried. "Whatever happens, don't pity me! I shall lose what little pluck is left to me if you do. I am reduced to such a state of cowardice that I would get out of the whole thing now, if I could see my way; but if I were to try to put things straight so late in the day as this it would only hasten the catastrophe, and discovery now would kill the poor old man upstairs. He was very ill in the night, Abney. Parker has asked Mrs. Boston to arrange a bed for one of the men in one of the small back rooms in that corridor. He was so frightened that he won't be left again without the means of communicating with the rest of the house."

"His heart again, I suppose?"

"Yes; Parker was holding him, and could not get to the bell. The interview with this Mr. Royston must have been too much for him. He is here still, Abney. Grand-papa pressed him to stay until your return, and he was

glad to do his old friend a little service. You will see him at dinner; he goes back to town by the mail to-night."

"You feel sure he is safe? Would it be any relief to you if I gave him a hint?"

"I am sure he is to be trusted," she answered, "and the less talking about it the better. No matter how guarded we may be, there is always danger in speaking of these things in a house full of people. I am getting so nervous under these constant attacks—first the letter, and now Mr. Royston's appearance and Mrs. Mirfield's open attack—that I can't even meet a glance from the servants without fancying they are watching me."

"It is very hard on you," said Garth.

"Yes, it is hard at times," she admitted; "but I ought not to complain; I never expected to find my life here a bed of roses. And even now I have not told you all, Abney. Charlotte came in after church yesterday afternoon full of an unpleasant adventure she had had. A man had followed her into the park to beg. Who do you think he said he was?"

"Philpott!" answered Garth, without an instant's hesitation.

"No, not Philpott. He gave no name, but he said he had been steward on Lord Mirfield's yacht."

"I don't believe it!" said Garth again. "It is not in the least likely. It is far more likely to be that poor wretch Philpott come down here on the chance of seeing you. Is he still here?"

"No; he went to Leeds last night. Charlotte gave him ten pounds."

"That was a pity." He thought for a moment. "I shall tell her you have told me this, and insist upon her placing the affair in my hands if he comes near her again. That will be the safest plan."

"By far the safest plan," agreed Molly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SLIP 'TWIXT CUP AND LIP.

AMONG the communications awaiting Mr. Borthwicke's attention on his return to Gray's Inn on Tuesday evening was a telegram from the good-natured actor Tom Desmond, dated from the Greenwich Theatre, and consisting of only four words:

"News of Philpott. Come!"

In his then state of mind—for Mr. Borthwicke had by no means recovered as yet from the moral trouncing he had received the previous day at the hands of Philip Royston, being one of those men who are not easily roused to a condition of active eruption, but, once roused, not easily subdued again—he regarded the arrival of this telegram at this particular crisis in the progress of affairs as a special interposition of Providence. It would have fretted and exasperated him to have been compelled to drop the hunt just now, while his blood was up, and he fairly jumped at the chance of going straight on with the affair at once.

Philpott had evidently come back direct to town from Cramlingford, instead of paying that visit to Leeds of which he had spoken to old Redhead. As likely as not he had never meant to go to Leeds at all, had only mentioned it as a blind.

Borthwicke wasted no time, however, over useless conjecture.

It was already after eight o'clock. He hurried away into Holborn to the restaurant he usually affected, got through a steak and chips as if he had made up his mind to accomplish a "shortest on record"—it was never Clem's "way" to be nasty particular over the manner of his feeding as long as the matter was satisfactory—took a hansom across to Cannon Street Station, and at a quarter to ten was interviewing the dragon on duty at the stage door of the Greenwich Theatre.

Close in money matters, as a rule, Clem was yet one of those far-seeing persons who know how to be generous at

the right moment, and as there was a very stringent rule at the little suburban house against allowing loiterers behind the scenes, the interview resulted in the exchange of two good half-crowns, before the necessary messenger was forthcoming to convey Mr. Borthwicke's card to Mr. Tom Desmond.

But there the difficulty ended, for that good fellow came running down to the door, with the card in his hand, and carried his visitor off toward the green-room, under the dragon's very nose, without any further "by your leave," whatever.

"I'm very glad to see you," he said, with his usual bohemian heartiness. "You won't mind waiting here ten minutes? I'm just going on. Haven't got time to take you to my room, and the old manager here goes rabid at the sight of a stranger in the wings. I think Claxton is inside, but I shan't be long in any case. I expect the man you want down here to-night. All right, I'm here!" he sang out in reply to some distant call, and went plunging out of sight by a doorway, through which came a mellow, full radiance of reflected light and the sound of voices raised in angry altercation, which betrayed its unreality by its artificially rounded periods.

Claxton was not in the green-room when Borthwicke got inside, but he was not sorry. He was glad to have a minute or two to himself. He had to confess that he was a little excited, and it was a relief not to have to force his thoughts away from the subject occupying his mind.

Philpott was coming here to-night! The chances were that to-morrow morning he and Philpott would be travelling toward York again, by the Great Northern express; that before the sun had accomplished another day's work, the little adventuress at Netley Fallow would have been driven to full confession of all her scheming, and have left the shelter of that patrician residence forever.

And it must be recorded to Mr. Borthwicke's credit that, at the mental picture of that delicate little creature tramping away from that splendid home, side by side with the drunken scoundrel who had blasted her whole life, a spasm of very real commiseration did seize upon him for a moment. But it scarcely lasted longer. She knew what she

was risking when she took Arthur Mirfield's love-child to Lord Netley, and passed him off as the lawful heir. By her own confession she had always been expecting this show-up. She knew it was nothing more than she deserved. It was pure maudlin sentiment to waste pity on a woman who had gone such lengths to secure her own ends. The whole affair from beginning to finish was just a fair, stand-up fight, with both sides acting on the defensive and offensive as opportunity offered, and in such a contest he would be a confounded fool indeed who missed a good opening because he was afraid of hurting his opponent.

When Desmond rushed away in that frantic hurry and left him, he did not go very far into the room. He took to studying the bills which were wafered against the wall just inside the door, and so kept his face that way, to watch for Desmond's return.

Two or three people were busy at the mirror on the opposite side of the room, and he was conscious, without seeing them, of the curious glances shot now and then in his direction. But he made no advances toward cordiality—just stood there with his back to the room, and his face lifted toward the strips of printed paper on the walls.

As he waited, a man came down the passage in the direction he had himself come just now, and paused a moment by the open door, to nod a good-evening at the actors inside.

He was a big man, tall, with broad shoulders; but one could only guess at his original height and width, for his once mighty shoulders were bent and rounded, and his once lofty head lowered by a stoop, which stunted and disguised his natural proportions. He had been a handsome man, too; the arch of the nostril and the fine curve of the upper lip, and even some trace of the well-marked brows were still discernible, among the later additions of baggy eyelids and flaccid, pendulous cheeks, and the cold, *dead* purple complexion which marks the drunkard during his periods of compulsory abstinence. But perhaps there was nothing so mournful about the whole man as his hands. They did not shake, but they went on forever wandering about in an aimless, hopeless fashion, as if they had been doomed for all time to keep up a continual search for some-

thing they would never find. Sometimes they would both be at work on one button of his coat, turning it this way and that, searching anxiously all round behind it, and pressing it between thumb and finger as if there was a suspicion that something might be concealed in its thickness. Some times the nerveless fingers would travel up and down the threadbare front of the coat itself, stopping at the slightest irregularity in the cloth, plucking it out and going on again in their endless endeavor to satisfy a nameless want; or again, the wandering hands would dip into a pocket, search there for a second or two, and come out to resume once more their fingering of his cravat, or the edge of his sleeve, or the hair behind his ears. And in all the sad hopelessness of the man's appearance nothing struck the beholder with such a keen sense of his lost condition as this aimless, incessant wandering of his poor, nerveless hands.

He did not attempt to come into the room, but stood a moment in the doorway, and smiled across at the man in front of the mirror, who was doing his best to persuade his mustache-ends to stick out in fierce horizontal points; and as he saw the smile Borthwicke said to himself that, in times gone by, this man had been one of those winning, brilliant fellows who make friends wherever they go, and have no enemy in the world but themselves.

"Try a little honest yellow soap, Jimmy," he said; "nothing stands the heat of the footlights so well. It holds out better than all the *cosmétiques* in the world."

"Think so?" observed the gentleman at the glass. "I tried spirit gum last night, but it took such a confounded time to get out again. If I go on with the part, I shall shave and get a false one of the right shape."

"Not you," said the other; "you think too much of your own. Try the honest yellow, my boy. I'll answer for it you'll never use anything else after one trial. Is Desmond in his room?"

"No; just gone on. You can go there, though. I heard him tell the dresser to ask you to wait there if you came while he was on the stage."

"Thank you."

"Poor old chap!" said the owner of the refractory mus-

tache, as the other passed on out of sight, his finger searching for something along the bottom of his waistcoat as he went; "he's breaking up very fast now."

"Who is he?" asked the man who had not spoken.

"Don't you know him? It's Dick Philpott; the original Mickey O'Shea in 'A Broth of a Boy,' in the provinces. I thought everybody knew Dick Philpott."

"Never saw him before. Heard of him often. Taken the shortest way home, hasn't he? Looks as if he had one foot in the grave. Drink, I suppose?"

"Yes. He'd have been at the top of the tree if it hadn't been for that chronic thirst of his. Such a pleasant fellow, too. The best company I ever met."

"It seems to me it always is the pleasant fellows who travel that road," said the other pitifully; and then Desmond came up, and bore Clem off to his dressing-room, and made him known to Philpott.

"Mr. Borthwicke says he can do you a good turn, Dick, old man," he said; "and if you'll just keep quiet till this change of mine is over—the changes alone are worth the salary in this piece, Mr. Borthwicke, I'm getting worn to a shadow—you can have the room to yourselves all through the last act, and have your chat in peace. There's only one thing you mustn't do, Mr. Borthwicke," he added, with a frank, kindly smile at Philpott: "you mustn't offer this fellow any whiskey. He's on the strict teetotal just now, and we're all on our honor not to ask him to taste spirits."

"Doctor's orders, you see, Mr. Borthwicke," Philpott explained, as if he felt it necessary to account for such an extraordinary state of things. "My health is not what it was; and it's not much good placing yourself under a doctor's hands if you don't carry out his instructions. But the embargo will soon be removed now," he added, setting his shoulders back for a moment, and looking as important as circumstances would allow of. "I hope to be my own master in a week or two."

To a man of finer nature there would have been something very pathetic in the sorry little attempt at dignity, in combination with those wandering hands, and that glimmer of a smile—which shimmered at you through the ruin of his face like a ghost of the "has been"—but

Mr. Borthwicke had no inclination just then for psychological researches. To him Philpott represented only one idea. He was the tool by which George Mirfield's right to the Netley succession was to be established, and Molly de Courcy's graceful little head brought low; and it was only so far as he might help or hinder the accomplishment of this purpose that he had any interest for the restless, bustling man of business.

"I have been up in Yorkshire for the last two days, Mr. Philpott," he began, as soon as they were left alone, in an atmosphere heavy with the odors of grease-paints and powder, with a touch of tobacco smoke and toddy added; "and in a part of Yorkshire that you may know something of—the village of Cramlingford."

Philpott's dull eyes fixed themselves on the questioner's face as if he were trying to feel a polite interest in the inquiry.

"What village?" he asked, thrusting a feeble hand into the deep pocket of his shabby overcoat, and groping all round it before he brought it out empty again. "I did not quite catch the name."

"Cramlingford," repeated Clem, very distinctly indeed. "The village outside the gates of Netley Fallow. You know it well enough."

Philpott looked away; his eyes searched about among the numberless items of "make-up" on Desmond's dressing-place, as if seeking inspiration there.

"Cramlingford?" he repeated vaguely.

"Oh, come now," said Clem half persuasively, but with a hectoring tone in his voice too, "you know the place well enough, Mr. Philpott! I only missed meeting you there by a few hours. What's the good of trying to make a mystery of your visit there? I know all about it, don't you see you know, so we may as well start fair."

A dull red crept up to Philpott's forehead, and there was very obvious reluctance in the slow lifting of his glance to Borthwicke's face.

"Oh, well, if you know all about it, I've nothing more to say," he said, with the air of one who yields a point unwillingly. "As you say, what is the use of making a mystery?"

"Quite so!" Mr. Borthwicke's swarthy, lined face was broadening out with gratification. "Quite so, Mr. Philpott! Now, I'm going to make a further confession: I not only know of your visit to Cramlingford, but I know your object in going there."

"Yes?"

"Yes; you went to try to get a private interview with—how shall I call the lady? Suppose we say Mrs. Molly; there can be no offence that way—you went to try to get private speech with Mrs. Molly. And, what is more, you weren't able to manage it. You were too timid about it. If I had seen you down there I would have contrived a meeting for you in no time; and without bringing Molly into trouble either."

"Ah!" said Philpott, with a sudden increase of interest; "I am with you there! I would starve in a gutter before I'd bring her into any further trouble."

"Of course! I knew that!" answered the other. He was planning his line of action as he went along. He saw how excessively cautious Philpott was. His only chance of bringing about the meeting between husband and wife lay in making Philpott believe that it was by her wish he was to be taken back to Cramlingford again. "And she knows it, too."

"Yes, I think she does."

"She does; she told me so herself."

At this magnificent lie Philpott's hands stopped their wandering for a moment, and a look that was almost a doubt showed itself in his glance.

"Yes, she told me so herself," repeated Clem impressively. "'He would not come near me to harm me,' she said; 'but I should so like to see the poor fellow again!'"

"She—Molly—said that to you?"

"Yes, yesterday morning, as I stood talking with her in the big hall at Netley Fallow. And seeing how anxious she was about it, I promised her I would try to persuade you to come down with me when I returned, and then we could arrange a comfortable meeting. I should certainly go if I were you. It will mean twenty pounds in your pocket, and an easily earned twenty pounds, too. You'd not be above taking it?"

He laughed a short, shamed laugh.

"No," he said; "in my present position I should not be above taking twenty pounds from any one; it would be such a help. It seems a lot of money to me now—twenty pounds. And you are sure that no harm could come to Molly from it?"

"Is it likely I should suggest it to you if it could?" returned the wily Clem. Nobody could accuse him of being a scrupulous man in matters of truth, and yet it is a fact that he felt he was playing a mean part in pitting himself against this poor creature, with the half-dimmed wits and helpless, wandering hands. But his compunction only affected him so far as to make him prefer an easy evasion of the truth to a downright lie. "Is it likely I should suggest that you should do anything that would harm Mrs. Molly? You and I will go down to Cramlingford to-morrow, have our chat with her on Thursday morning, and you shall come back when and how you like, with your twenty pounds in your pocket. Where are you staying just now?"

At the sudden abrupt inquiry a look of such 'cuteness flashed into Philpott's faded eyes that if Borthwicke had seen it he would have altered his entire plan of action on the instant; but it was not to be. He was feeling in his pocket for his note-book, and so lost that warning-note of what was to come.

"You shall give me your address in case of mistakes," he said; "and I will give you the directions in writing for our start to-morrow, so as to avoid the chance of a muddle as far as we can. Are you staying in this neighborhood?"

"No," Philpott answered; "I am staying at Thompson's Buildings, St. John's Street Road."

"My part of the town. My rooms are at Gray's Inn. What is your number?"

"Fourteen."

Borthwicke wrote it down and read it aloud, to make sure there was no mistake.

"And now for my instructions for the morning," he said.

There was a keen air of satisfaction about him as he made his arrangements. Even as he wrote down the name of the station, and the hour at which the train started, he

was hoping to himself that "that poker-backed old Royston" might still be at Netley Fallow when Philpott made his appearance there. He was glorying in the fact that he had been able to get hold of Philpott without Royston's help, and it would sweeten his triumph over Molly de Courcy cent per cent if Royston should be present to witness it.

He was very impressive and careful in his instructions concerning the start.

"If you think there is any chance of your making a mistake," he said, "I will call for you myself, and take you down to the station."

But Philpott would not hear of this. He would just jump into an omnibus at the Angel, he said, and ride down Pentonville; he knew every step of the neighborhood, had had a season at Sadler's Wells before he gave up acting for good, and could not possibly make a mistake.

And he was just as decided in his refusal to travel back with Mr. Borthwicke that night. Claxton was about the theatre somewhere; he was going up with him.

At this second mention of Claxton's name Clem be-thought him that he did not care about a meeting with that gentleman in the present crisis of affairs. During the last interview with Desmond at the Camel and Howdah, he had shown rather an inclination to "watch the case" on behalf of Mrs. Molly, and a little interference of that kind just now might upset the whole thing again.

If, for instance, he chose to point out to Philpott that his presence at Cramlingford was fraught with peril for Molly, there would be an end of the morrow's expedition.

"Don't say anything here about our journey into Yorkshire to-morrow," he said. "If Desmond wants to know what I wanted with you, just say you don't know yet, but that you are coming to see me to-morrow; which will be true enough, don't you see you know."

And with this gratuitous lesson in equivocation he took his departure, and got back as quickly as possible to Gray's Inn, where he sat up until the small hours began to grow big, attending to the three days' accumulation of correspondence which had awaited him on his return.

As a natural consequence, but very much to his own vex-

ation, he rather overslept himself in the morning, and only got down to King's Cross five minutes before the departure of the train.

He put a couple of sovereigns into a porter's hand, and told him to get the tickets, and then hurried off to the platform, expecting to find Philpott in a state of nervous agitation over his non-appearance. He went the length of the train, his quick, crafty black eyes darting here and there among the groups of people round the open doors, and saw no sign of the man he wanted. Then he worked his way down the train again—this time going to each door and assuring himself that Philpott was not already seated—but with no better success.

The written instructions had directed him to remain under the clock on the departure platform until Borthwicke came to him. Once certain that he was not already here, Clem took up his position at the appointed spot, and watched and waited for his appearance with the best patience he could, till the guard came hurrying down the train with his signal flag unfurled in his hand.

He gave up then, and went and stood at the outside door for five, ten, fifteen minutes, but no Philpott came.

After that he walked out to the road and watched a score or so of Angel omnibuses pass, thinking it possible that Philpott had miscalculated his time, and would still turn up.

But even this exciting occupation palled upon him after a time, and he took a sudden resolution to go up to Thompson's Buildings and find out for himself the cause of the delay.

And he went; and after an infinity of trouble found number fourteen, only to meet with an astounding rebuff.

Mr. *and* Mrs. Philpott had left their lodgings that morning quite early.

They had only taken the rooms for a week, the landlady told him; they had come to her last Wednesday, and so, of course, their time was up to-day. No, she had not the faintest idea where they had gone to; and, yes, she had thought they seemed in a desperate hurry over the "clear-out." Mrs. Philpott had sat up till three o'clock this morning packing, and that, too, after saying she should

not touch her boxes until to-day. What sort of a person was Mrs. Philpott? Oh, there was nothing very particular about her. She looked like a woman who had had her share of trouble, as well she might, with such a wreck of a husband. Young? Well, it wouldn't be easy to guess her age. She might be over thirty or not, somewhere thereabouts.

If Mrs. George Mirfield could have taken a peep at her brother after he had regained the shelter of his own rooms that morning, she would have blessed her lucky stars that this further frustration of their hopes had not occurred while he was under her roof.

He was not a pleasant object to look at as he paced his untidy, grimy sitting-room, kicking out viciously at anything that came in his way, with all sorts of unholy threats and oaths bursting now and again from his lips, as if his rage was such that there was not room in him to contain it, like a pot on the boil that has been filled too full.

In his present mood, his greatest annoyance was that there was not the smallest blame to be attached to anybody but himself for this aggravating slip 'twixt cup and lip. If he could have taken it out of somebody else it would have been a huge solace to him; but it had been caused by nothing but his own blethering idiocy—which was his own graceful way of expressing it—in allowing that broken-down old drunkard to go out of his sight after once finding him, until he had made all the use he wanted of him.

And beyond the disappointment in his immediate plans there were other matters fretting and perplexing him. Who, for instance, was this Mrs. Philpott, who had suddenly sprung into existence, from the Lord only knew where? Was she the problematical first wife, who had chosen, this time of all others, to put in an appearance?

As this idea occurred to him he began to rail at himself for not having touched on the question of that hypothetical earlier marriage last night. He had not even taken the trouble to get the cunning old imbecile's real name from him; if he had, he might have obtained the evidence of the marriage with Molly de Courcy for himself. But he had been so fascinated with the notion of hurling a social bombshell into the midst of the people who had made

him feel his inferiority, that he had lost sight of the other and less sensational mode of gaining his end. He cursed his own stupidity, now that it was too late, in allowing personal feeling to blind him to the fulness of his opportunity.

Then there was another thing puzzling him. Why had this old fool thrown up the chance of making twenty pounds (unless, indeed, somebody had put him on his guard against harming Molly)? Even supposing this lady who had turned up so inopportunist was really the first wife, it was not easy to understand why she should put herself out of the way to prevent Philpott earning what, to them, must certainly appear a considerable sum. Nobody but people in needy circumstances would reside in such a place as Thompson's Buildings, and to people in needy circumstances twenty pounds would mean a period of absolute affluence. What could have been their motive in throwing away such a chance?

And even as he put the question to himself, the answer came—Mr. Abney Garth!

Yes; that was it! There was not a doubt of it! Garth or his agent—it was the same thing in effect—had got at these Philpotts, and persuaded them to keep dark. What Garth's motive could be in championing Molly de Courcy's cause like this, it was impossible to make the wildest guess at, but the fact that he did so champion it was none the less apparent for that.

It was like walking down a country lane on a dark night, and hearing footsteps at your side. You know quite well that your invisible neighbor is going in the same direction as yourself, and that is all you know, either of him or his intentions, unless he choose to enlighten you.

Of course Borthwicke went down to the little theatre at Greenwich again that evening. It was his last chance for the present, and he would not neglect it, though at the same time he did not expect much good to result from it, and in this respect he was not disappointed.

He caught Desmond after the second act, in the middle of his change for the prison scene—Clem was getting quite well posted in the numerous vicissitudes undergone by the hapless hero in "The Madman's Legacy," and their

effect upon his personal appearance—and went to his point at once.

“Philpott had an appointment with me to-day, and did not keep it,” he said; “I came down to see if you could give me his address.”

“And that is just what I can’t do,” Desmond answered. “There is something more wrong than usual with the poor old chap’s affairs, I’m afraid. He went away from here last night more cheerful than I’ve seen him for a long time, and I set it down to his chat with you; but when I came down to-night I found a letter from him waiting for me here, asking me not to think it queer if he doesn’t show up again yet awhile, as he has got himself into a muddle, and is obliged to lie close for a time.”

“I suppose you can’t form an idea as to the nature of the muddle?” inquired Clem.

“Not the faintest! The only thing I can think of is debt; but who in the world would be fool enough to try to squeeze a debt out of poor Dick? It would be throwing good money after bad with a vengeance.”

“Rather!” said Clem impressively; and thought busily for a few seconds, and then began again: “Mr. Desmond, do you know anything of Philpott’s domestic arrangements—his present arrangements, I mean?”

For the briefest of seconds Desmond took his eyes off his reflection in the glass, to flash an inquiring glance at his questioner.

“Domestic arrangements?” he echoed. “I did not know he had any. He only came out of the asylum ten days ago, you know.”

“Well, I found out this morning that there is a Mrs. Philpott in the case.”

“What! another of ’em!” cried Desmond, with a touch of scandalized amusement. “What an old rascal it is.”

“Then you had not heard anything about it? I was wondering if it was that first wife of his come back to life again.”

“No; I never heard him say a word on the subject. Now you speak of it, I do remember noticing that he looked a little better cared for than he had done for some time before he went into the asylum—his heels well set

up, and no buttons missing on his waistcoat, and so on—but if I tried to account for it at all I put it down to a more than usually charitable landlady. Dick always had a way of winning his landladies' hearts in the old days, I remember."

Clearly no information to be gained here, thought Clem to himself, raging inwardly with mortification as he said good-night to the busy actor, and found his way out of the theatre again. He was feeling considerably smaller than he had felt for a very long time indeed. He had built his hopes so high upon this meeting with Philpott, he had made so sure of bringing about a crisis of some sort when once he should be in personal communication with this man, and lo! he had had his spell of personal communication, it was over and done with, and he was not one whit nearer his object than he had been before. Little Molly de Courcy was as secure in her position at Netley Fallow as she had ever been, and George's chance of the succession had not improved by one shade for all the anxiety and annoyance and time that had been wasted over the affair.

But for the innate doggedness of his disposition this rebuff would have induced him to wash his hands of the business for good. As it was, he only consented to drop it for a time. He was "bested;" he confessed it candidly; but it only needed the smallest scrap of encouragement, the smallest shred of new information, to set him off again as rabid as ever.

And when he consented thus to drop the running for a time, it was beyond his wildest dreams to imagine in what an entirely different direction he would travel when he took it up again. At this period his only chance seemed to lie in catching Philpott when he should return to Cramlingford, according to his arrangement with Redhead.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BITTEREST DROP IN A BITTER DRAUGHT.

A BLESSED period of rest had fallen on Netley Fallow again. Molly snatched at the breathing-time as a drowning man snatches at a floating spar; knowing well that he must drown ultimately, and is only lengthening out his torment, he yet has not the stoicism to let the means of a temporary breathing-space go past him.

A clear fortnight had passed since Mr. Royston had left Netley Fallow, and taken with him that atmosphere of doom which had encircled Molly for a time; from the arrival of the anonymous letter containing the information about Philpott, until Mrs. George Mirfield's open attack on the afternoon of Abney Garth's return from London. It had been a fortnight of perfect calm and quietness.

Garth had had his interviews with Mr. Kennett and Lord Netley concerning his intentions toward Charlotte, and what opposition had been offered had faded away before his quiet determination, and Charlotte's smiling assertion that she meant to have her own way. The wedding had been fixed for the New Year, and Charlotte was beginning already to take a renewed interest in the fashion plates.

Molly supported her as loyally in this as she had in every other emergency, great or small, since the first day of her arrival at the Fallow. Still, it was inevitable that, under the new condition of things, Charlotte should not need so much of her society as formerly; and in particular Molly got into the habit of vacating the octagon room—where tea was usually served now that the weather was getting more chilly—toward the dusk of the afternoon; only turning up, a few minutes before the dressing-bell rang, to drink a cup of lukewarm tea as she stood with her feet on the fender-stool, awaiting the signal for departure to her dressing-room. And these dusky hours, which Garth and Charlotte spent in a delightful *solitude à deux*, Molly spent

in quiet wanderings round and about the gardens and shrubberies near the house.

It was perhaps not astonishing that she should look forward to these quiet hours in the sombre twilight as a kind of landing-place in the ladder of her daily life—a space where she could plant her feet and rest a little from the eternal struggle of keeping up appearances.

It is true that she thought a great deal, during these quiet hours, of the difficulties surrounding the position into which her own recklessness and her desire for her boy's welfare had brought her; but it was inevitable that she should also think a great deal of the man who had treated her with such unparalleled generosity. And the twilight encouraged these memories.

As the shades deepened among the shrubs and trees of the stately Fallow gardens, she recalled that other night, when she had stood in the fading daylight on the edge of the cliff at Leuville, saying good-by to the man who had not a shred of reputation or character left in the eyes of the world—the man who had dropped his claim to an earldom and thirty thousand a year because he would not harm the woman he loved.

She remembered how the moon had come up behind the little house while they stood there, twinkling at them through the quivering needles of the pines, showing each the strained white face of the other, when it would have been so much better that they should have been kept hidden. There were no pines here, on the ladies' lawn at Netley; but there were elms and beeches, and the moon was peeping at her through the fast-thinning branches, with very much the same calm indifference for all things mundane as she had shown on that other night a month ago. The smooth green of the turf—sprinkled with the leaves which had fallen since the morning's sweeping—was dotted here and there with rose-edged patches of light, which flitted here and there as the breeze swayed the boughs on the trees overhead. Molly left the lawn presently, and began pacing to and fro in the shadow thrown by the house, along the walk under the drawing-room windows. From here she watched the patches of light move and go in and out, as the branches above interlaced and

separated again, letting the moonlight through in flashes of radiance, and then shutting them out with the bewildering rapidity of a kaleidoscopic change. She was telling herself that she should never appreciate the beauty of moonlight again, because of the pained memory it would bring with it; because she would never be able to dissociate it from the recollection of George Mirfield's hungry look of longing, from the remembrance of his figure standing on the edge of the cliff gazing seaward, after she had prayed him to spare her.

And then, all in an instant, she began to tremble violently, and to tell herself that she was the victim of a ghastly hallucination; for as the breeze bent the topmost branches for a moment, and left a patch of brightness on one of the far corners of the lawn, she saw the very embodiment of her thoughts—saw George Mirfield's face and figure, broad-shouldered out of all proportion to its height, with the long arms hanging straight down from the shoulders, just as she had seen it in the moonlight on the Leuville cliff.

The apparition lasted but a moment before the branches sprang back to their natural height, and plunged the spot into dense shadow again; and then Molly, crouching in deadliest fear in a corner of one of the window recesses, began to call herself severely to order.

She had not really seen anything; or, if she had, it was one of the gardeners searching for a lost spade or some such thing, whom her fervid imagination had transformed on the spot into a likeness of the person in her thoughts.

She was so angry with herself for what she called her "attack of the supernatural," that nothing less than instant investigation would satisfy her. Straightening her shaking limbs, she marched in a direct line for the spot where she had seen the awesome thing.

"Who is it there?" she called out as she advanced; "and what are you doing here so late as this? If you don't instantly answer me I will loose the dogs."

Thus challenged, a figure moved quickly forward into the light and stood awaiting her.

Molly stopped, and her hands clutched each other across her breast.

"George!" she whispered, with a sobbing catch in her breath. "Is it you, really?"

"It is I, really, Molly."

"I thought—I was afraid—you frightened me dreadfully, George."

"I am sorry. If I had thought to find you wandering about in the damp at this time of night, I would have kept away."

"Come nearer; let me touch you; let me convince myself that you really are flesh and blood, and not a mere imagining."

He came forward and gave her his hand.

"That is good," she said, smiling a little wistfully at him, as if she found something wanting in his greeting.

"It is your very own hand-clasp, George; I know of none other like it. What were you doing there in the corner?"

"Must I really tell you?" he asked. "I think it would be better not to ask me. I was just taking a look at the old place."

"But it was such a strange way to take a look at it!" She was still breathing quickly, in spite of her desire to imitate his quietness. "From a dark corner like that! Why didn't you come in at the front door?"

"Well, I wanted particularly to see this side of the house, and—to speak the honest truth, I did not wish any one to see me about the place, so I came into the park from the other side, and climbed the ha-ha into the garden."

"Oh!" There was something in the resolute self-repression of his bearing which had a curiously quieting effect upon her. Standing there in the moonlight, with him at her side, so calmly conventional in speech and manner, she almost felt as if the memory of that passionate farewell in the Leuville garden was a mere trick of imagination, as if it had never taken place in reality.

"My intention," he went on, looking quietly down at her upturned face, "my settled intention was to come down and spend a quiet evening with my mother, and get away again in the morning before anybody had heard of my arrival. And then, as I walked up the hill from Little Croxmore, I saw that row of windows"—pointing to the

lamp-lit windows of the west wing—"shining at me across the park. I thought that most likely you and Charlotte would be up there dressing for dinner, and a ridiculous fancy took me to come and have a closer look at the old place."

Molly thought she understood now.

"And so I came, and gave you a good fright, and was threatened with the dogs for my pains. You see, I never expected to find anybody prowling about the place at this time of night."

It came into Molly's head to tell him about Charlotte and Abney, but she did not do it. There was something about this unpremeditated meeting, some feeling that it belonged to their two selves exclusively, which made her shrink from introducing any ordinary topic of conversation; she did not know why, she only knew that it was so. The quiet decorum of his manner only intensified this feeling. She knew, to the innermost core of her being, that he was maintaining this show of calmness by a supreme effort, and, without reasoning it out, she felt that there must be some all-powerful motive for this supernal self-control.

"I am glad you altered your mind and came," she said. "I am glad I have seen you. It would hurt me to have found out afterward that you had been here without my seeing you. I always think of you as the greatest and most generous friend a woman ever had. To know you had been so near, without even a hand-shake passing between us, would have been a real trouble to me."

"In that case I am glad you caught me," he answered her. "I would not willingly cause you a moment's anxiety or pain of any kind, as I think you know."

"I think I do," she responded quaintly; and then they stood quiet for a little, both conscious of a desire to break through this barrier of restraint, and equally conscious that their only safety lay in maintaining an outward show of reserve.

"Did you come down to see your mother with any special purpose?" asked Molly presently. "She is not ill, I hope; but we should have heard if she had been."

"No, she is not ill. I came down to say 'good-by.'"

"Good-by? You are going away—somewhere a great distance off?"

"It is just possible I may. Paris has palled on me a little since my return from—just lately, I should say. It is never a very cheerful place in the autumn, you see, and so I thought I would take a little trip farther a-field, to Egypt or India, or even Australia. I have not made up my mind where it is to be yet."

She steadied herself carefully before she spoke again.

"It is through me you are doing this," she said. "It is because you find Paris unendurable without the excitement of the playing."

"Well, even so, I don't see why you should speak of it in that self-accusing fashion," he returned, with a quiet touch of protest. "You speak as if you felt you had done me a great harm, instead of the best turn that has ever been done me in my life. I shall put the craving for excitement that is in me to some better purpose now. Perhaps I shall have a turn at the gold fields, or perhaps I shall put all my restless energy into boundary-riding on the Australian sheep-runs. Any change must be for the better, Molly."

The name slipped out unwittingly, but she scarcely heard it; she was too much occupied with more important matters.

"Still, I can't forget that it is through me you are going away," she repeated sorrowfully. "If your mother could know, she——"

"But she never must know," he cried, breaking into her sentence with sudden uneasiness. "She must never know—anything at all of—that time, Molly. You have not said anything?"

She shook her head.

"She thinks we were the merest acquaintances."

"That is right," he answered, with obvious relief. "She must not suspect how things are with me. She might doubt me and my investigations at Leuville, and that might lead her to send somebody else over the ground again. You understand?"

Yes, she quite understood; there was no doubt about that. She only caught her hands together and drew a quick breath, but it was answer enough.

"You have been well since you left Leuville?" he asked, getting away from the other subject with as much haste as he could. "And Charlotte's little one—has she quite got over her illness?"

Molly answered something, she did not know what, and then he put out his hand and she laid hers in it, wondering if he would feel how it shook, and take a little pity on her at the last moment. Surely, surely he would not part from her like this!

But he did. He closed his fingers over hers in a warm, friendly pressure, and let them drop again.

"Good-by," he said. "Give Artie Mr. Smith's respects, and—— By-the-bye, there is that daub I did; would you like to have it?"

"I should treasure it above everything."

"Very well, I will send it to you. Don't tell anybody the name of the artist—I am not proud of my work—and I should be glad if you kept quiet about having seen me to-night. I should like, if possible, to get away again without any fuss at all."

Of course she undertook to do as he wished, and he walked off toward the narrow shrubbery path, calling back in a low, laughing voice as he went to tell her that the chances were he should be collared by the keepers before he got out of the park again.

She waited there on the edge of the lawn, listening to the gravels crunching under his tread. She could not believe he had gone like that; he would turn back, just for a moment, to put his arms round her, to whisper one short "God bless and keep you, my darling!" He must know how her heart hungered for one little sign of affection. Surely he would give her a chance of saying that she would be true to him till her dying breath!

But that was just what he had made up his mind not to do; and his steady footsteps trailed off into the distance without a falter or pause, until they became inaudible to the listener on the ladies' lawn, strain her ears as she would. She still stood there, long after the sounds had

been swallowed up by the silence of the night; stood there immovable and rigid, held close in the clasp of a pain which lay too deep for such frivolous relief as tears could bring. The dressing-bell roused her at last, and she shuddered as she turned to go back to the house. Just for the time being she was in open rebellion against fate. Rather a thousand deaths than the lengthening out of this weary struggle with destiny. If George had come back to her then she would have cried out what was in her heart:

"Take me with you! I crave for nothing in comparison with the agony of this separation. Let the world condemn as it will, I will endure all for the sake of my love!"

But he did not come back; he had more mercy for her than she had for herself. It is well that these impulses of self-renunciation come so often after the opportunity for carrying them out is past. It is God's goodness which ordains that it shall be so, else who should stand against such a strain on the heart-strings as this of Molly's?

As she was crossing the hall to the staircase she met Charlotte; Charlotte, brilliant and expansive in mood, fresh from her long *tête-à-tête* with her lover.

"Why, Molly child, how nipped up you look!" she cried, putting an arm round the smaller woman's shoulders, with a delightful touch of comfort and protection. "My dear girl, why will you absent yourself like this day after day, and go wandering about in the lonely twilight like some spirit from the regions of the unquiet dead? You are as cold as a stone. Why do you go out like this, Molly? You can't imagine that I or Abney would think you *de trop*! After all your sweetness and goodness to me, do you think I want to toss you on one side the moment I've got a sweetheart to talk to? I shall get quite offended with you, my dear, if you hold yourself aloof from us so persistently."

But Molly shook her head and smiled—though her lips felt stiff at the task while her heart was so full of misery.

"Speak for yourself, my dear Lotte," she said gently. "Think of the arrears of love-making that Abney has to make up. Let him have some sort of chance to put a little of the stored-up tenderness of all these years into words at last."

Charlotte laughed, and even looked a trifle conscious, as she ran off up the stairs. She was finding out at last what sort of thing a man's love was, and often asked herself, wonderingly, how she could have endured poor dead and gone Lionel's colorless make-believe.

George Mirfield had thoroughly understood the kind of task he was setting himself when he decided on this visit to his mother. He knew quite well the sort of cross-examination he would have to go through at her hands concerning his Leuville experiences, and he flattered himself that he had learned his lesson so correctly that it would be impossible to trip him up, or convict him of the slightest misstatement on the matter.

And yet, after he had safely passed through his ordeal, and his mother in turn began to enlighten him on the subject of her discoveries, as he listened to the story of the Philpott marriage, he did, in his great surprise, nearly lose his presence of mind.

His first thought, when he heard that this Philpott was still alive, was one of elucidation. He understood now why Molly had been so emphatic in her refusal of him.

His mother having once started the subject, he did not allow her to drop it until he had wrung from her every iota of information she possessed upon it; and in this way he got at the fact—which she in her spite would have rather suppressed—that Molly had not believed herself to be Philpott's lawful wife when she married Arthur Mirfield. This gave him the opening he wanted, and he took instant advantage of it.

“For the little woman, personally, I have no feeling, one way or the other,” he said; “she seems to have put her foot in it with you somehow, but I expect that is principally because she is the mother of my rival for the Netley stakes. Now, between you and me, mother, I'm of the opinion that she has been treated disgracefully all the way through, and I don't feel a bit inclined to join my howl to the hue and cry of running her down.”

Mrs. Mirfield left off fanning herself—she was near the fire, and she had got a little warm over the excitement of discussing Molly's enormities—she shut her fan up with a click, and opened her black eyes very wide indeed.

"What do you mean by that, George?"

"Now, don't look at me like that, old lady!" he cried, with an air of mock alarm, drawing his chair nearer hers as he spoke, so that he could lean his elbow on the arm of it, and so bring his face close. "This is the last evening you and I will spend together for our Heavenly Father alone knows how long, so we won't spoil it by any arguments. I only wanted you to try and see for yourself how hard it was on this poor little soul, that she should be hounded down, after all these years, for a thing that was never a fault of her own. If we could get at this Philpott now, there would be a certain amount of satisfaction to be got out of pommelling him till he hadn't got a feature left to bless himself with, but the young woman deserves nothing but pity for her share in the business."

"Let us keep to the point, George, if you please," remonstrated his mother, still maintaining her upright position, and keeping her glance on his face. "Am I to understand that it is you wish that I should drop these investigations? Do you mean to say that you would rather resign your lawful right to the succession to Netley, than bring about this young woman's exposure?"

George saw the danger of such a declaration as that, and drew back just in time.

"No, no; I won't go so far as that," he answered lightly, "but I think perhaps this affair can be managed without what you call 'an exposure' at all. It seems to me, that you and my uncle are carrying this thing through as if you felt a personal grudge against Mrs. Arthur. Surely she has been more unfortunate than wicked all through the piece?"

"Do you call it honorable conduct to hold on to the advantages the position of Arthur's widow gives her, when she has no right to it?"

"I don't think I should call it as iniquitous as you seem to consider it, old lady. If you were in her place, don't you think you would make the best fight you could for me? Haven't you fought my battles tooth and nail through much worse squeezes than this that she is in now? It is you that I'm thinking most of. I don't want to stand up for this little person who has got into your bad books, but

I do want you to come out of the business with clean hands. It seems to me that it wouldn't look well for you to be in the front rank of her accusers. Leave the dirty job for somebody else to do. In any case, I don't see the utility of forcing it forward now, during the old man's lifetime. It can do me no good, and if he thought I should inherit, it might lead him to cut off every possible farthing from the estate, and leave the title as barren as he could."

This point touched her.

"I had not thought of that," she said.

"And there is another little thing," he added. "I should take it as a personal obligation if you would drop the whole business, and it may be a considerable time before I ask you to oblige me again. I don't want people to say that you were grabbing at the old man's goods and chattels before the breath was out of him."

Mrs. Mirfield's color rose slowly. George was finding out the joints of her armor with a vengeance.

"I had not looked at it in that light," she said consideringly.

"Of course you had not!" he answered. "That old griffin of a Clem has only allowed you to see things from his point of view—not a very exalted one, I fancy—and now I want you to look at them from your own standpoint. It would not be pleasant to you to know that you were spoken of as a grasping, greedy woman, with a particularly keen eye for the main chance. Very well, then, leave me to manage the business in my own fashion. When the right time comes to assert my claim, you need never fear but that I will do it; but you must leave me to choose the time for myself. Let it rest until my return from this expedition. Nothing would keep me back now; I have made up my mind to see some fighting, and what good would the title and estates do me out among the hill-tribes in Burmah?"

Mrs. Mirfield's lips began to twitch—she had already had one fit of weeping this evening—and she put her hand on his as it lay on the arm of her chair.

"It will break my heart, I think," she said brokenly.

"My dear old lady, that is just what it won't do!" he returned with pleasant decision. "It will hearten you up,

rather. Until now, I've always been a sort of bogie to you, a person of whom you could not speak with comfort, because you could never find anything good to say. Oh, but I know all about it," he added with a little laugh, as she made a movement of protest. "I know how Lady Burton and Mrs. Codrington, and all the rest of your cronies, talk about me as soon as your back is turned: 'Such a scamp of a son, my dear; everything that is wicked and unmentionable. Poor woman, she is greatly to be pitied!' Well, now, I am going to alter all that. I am going to give you a chance to say something creditable about me at last. Think how well it will sound to say: 'My son? Oh, yes; he is out fighting in India.' And when I distinguish myself very greatly, and you see my name in all the papers as 'having been mentioned for the V.C.,' just imagine how strange and fine it will seem to feel proud of your reformed prodigal. You will hardly know what to make of it, after shrinking up into your shell at the mere mention of my name, as you've been doing for these last few miserable years."

It is incredible the rapidity with which news of this kind travels about in country places. Before Mrs. Mirfield and her son had left the dinner-table that evening, the servants at the Fallow were talking over his return, and his probable departure for foreign service on the morrow.

Lady Mirfield's maid brought the news to her at bedtime, and she passed it on to Abney in the morning, and Abney scribbled a little note and sent the information in to Lord Netley with the letters which had come by the post.

Since Molly's return from Leuville, the old man had alluded two or three times to her account of George's dexterity and presence of mind in rescuing Artie from under his horse's hoofs; and in these allusions Garth had fancied he saw a touch of returning kindness for the absent scapegrace. If he was really going abroad on active service, Lord Netley might like to say good-by to him. At any rate, Garth decided to give him the opportunity, and sent him the information the moment he heard it. And so it happened that between ten and eleven o'clock Garth presented himself at Mrs. Mirfield's garden gate, as ambas-

sador from his lordship, and bearer of a shakily scribbled note, in which the old man asked his nephew to come up and shake hands before he left.

"They would like you to come up to dinner if you can," Garth explained. "The vicar and Mrs. Codrington and Mr. Kennett are dining here to-night, and Lord Netley thought you might like to shake hands with them too before starting."

And George looked at his mother's face, and said yes. He did not relish the notion a bit. After his experience of Bohemia, and its free and easy notions of etiquette, he dreaded this sudden plunge into respectability again; but he would make the sacrifice for his mother, and he would have his reward in another glance at Molly.

It was with a curious feeling of unreality that he entered the large drawing-room at the Fallow again, after all these years of absence. It needed the pressure of his mother's hand on his arm to assure him he was not in a dream. It was all so familiar, and yet so strange. The soft glow of golden-colored light from the wax candles; the Louis Quatorze chairs and couches, with their mellow, amber satin upholstery; the long row of high, narrow windows draped with russet brown plush; the gorgeous white marble mantel, carved and alcoved up to the ceiling; he remembered it all so well, and yet it all seemed so strange. But, dreamlike as everything appeared to him in that first moment, nothing struck him with such a sense of unreality as a small, daintily rounded figure, which was standing by Lord Netley's chair. The figure was clad in a low-cut gown of black, heavily embroidered in jet, from which the pure white throat and shoulders rose in delicate contrast.

Without being aware of it, he had always associated Molly inalienably in his memory with the white cambric frocks she had worn at Leuville—a figure almost childlike in its delicate roundness; a *tout ensemble* of absolute simplicity, in which the effect was gained by the complete absence of all thought of personal appearance. This beautifully dressed little lady, with her fashionably coiffed brown hair, and her gracefully cut dinner-gown, was hardly recognizable to him in that first glance. Loving her with all his might as he did, it had never occurred to him that she

was a woman of whom a man would be proud. But, as his eyes fell upon her, standing with one hand on the back of Lord Netley's chair, taking her part in a conversation which seemed to have a very profound interest for Mr. Codrington and Marcus Kelper, as he saw the quick, warm play of eye and lip, and noted how even the ponderously clever vicar seemed to think her observations worth listening to, it came as a revelation to him that, with all his wealth of love, he had never done her full justice. Here was a woman whose gifts of mind and manner were at least equal to her personal graces.

She saw him before he reached Lord Netley's side, and flashed a glance at him as he came, which made his heart leap within him. Let her be as much of an adventuress as she might, she was a woman to be loved through everything to the death.

The vicar and Kelper moved a little aside as he approached—there was something of the air of a state ceremony about this reception of the scape-grace by the head of his house—and Molly would have withdrawn too, but the old man put his hand out detainingly, and she remained.

"I am very glad indeed to see you, George," he said. "Ever since Mrs. Arthur's return from Normandy, I have been anxious to have an opportunity of expressing my gratitude to you, for your clever rescue of Arthur's little son. The exploit has lost nothing at his mother's hands, I can assure you."

"I can well believe that, sir," returned George, with a look at Molly. "If I had fetched the boy out of a powder magazine after the match had been lit, Mrs. Arthur could not have made more of it at the time."

With the cordiality which became him so supremely, Lord Netley took Mrs. Mirfield's hands in his own. She had been hanging back a little, content for once to be effaced.

"So this boy is going to make a proud woman of you after all!" he said. "Nothing has gladdened my heart so much since my great trouble fell upon me as the news that he had applied for active service."

"I wish I could feel really glad about it," she murmured.

"Ah, that is like all you women!" cried his lordship. "You are thinking of the perils when you should be thinking of the glory. You waste all your tenderness on a man's physical suffering; you spend more pity on a broken bone or the loss of a trumpery limb than on the total extinction of a man's reputation. My dear sister-in-law, be thankful for the blessing that has fallen on you, as I am. George is going at last to rescue the name of Mirfield from the oblivion in which it has rusted for so long. I am very grateful to him."

The evening was well on, and Lord Netley had retired some time, before George got the opportunity he had been watching for, of a last word with Molly. Everybody was anxious to show him a little civility, and, beyond that, it was not easy to catch Molly by herself. She was always in request, and always apparently interested in the occupation of the moment; and yet he knew her thoughts were with him the evening through. He did his very best not to let the people in the room see what an irresistible attraction she had for him. Once or twice he resolutely turned his chair with its back toward her end of the room, but he found it impossible to rest that way; he got round again without knowing how, until he was able to catch an occasional glimpse of the small brown head, the turn of the delicate white throat, or the soft curve of the pretty arm. After to-night his glance might never rest on them again. Could it be expected of him that he should withstand the yearning to look his fill now?

And again and again during the evening he told himself he was glad of what he had done. She was in her right place here, in Lord Netley's beautiful old house, cheering the old man's declining days, and playing an enchanting second to Charlotte's position of hostess. And he would be in his right place out yonder, potting away at the yelling fanatics whenever opportunity offered, and doing his best to wipe out the sickening unmanliness of his last five years of life, with the discomfort and discipline of a few flying advances into the disaffected districts in Upper Burmah.

He caught her at last, as she came back from a last word or two with Mrs. Codrington at the door. His mother

was talking with Mr. Kennett and Charlotte and Garth, quite at the other end of the room. He stopped Molly and got her into a chair, mid-way down, near where a large stand of engravings stood.

"At last!" he said, picking a picture at hazard from the stand, and holding it toward her upside down. "I began to be afraid I was not to get a word with you."

"And I too!" she answered, leaning over the inverted print with an air of the most absorbed interest, "and my heart has been in my throat all the evening at the thought. If you had had your own way, George, you would have gone away without saying one word to me about this fighting business."

"What was the use of bothering you——"

"Bothering me?" she echoed, catching him up in a little fury of passionate reproach. "Bothering me! You can speak like that to me!"

A quick, dry sob clutched at her words and held them back for a moment, and he began to talk busily about the picture, without knowing in the least what he was saying.

"You would have gone away," she went on, when the little spasm was past; "you would have gone out there, into the deadly perils of this expedition—oh, don't talk nonsense to me about its being a mere pleasure trip—without giving me a chance of saying 'God guard you and send you back home in safety and honor!' George, I've never been a good woman, but I will be now—I will, dear, because the religious people say that the prayers of the wicked bring a curse rather than a blessing, and I must pray for you. I shall know now what it means to wrestle with God in prayer."

Her face, with its look of suppressed misery, was almost too much for him. She ground out her words with a dead mechanical regularity which told what it cost her to maintain her outward calmness.

"Every quiet moment I have my heart will be crying out to Heaven for you. If I could have the opportunity now, I would tell you all my most unhappy history, just as you told me yours, and you would pity more than blame me, George—I know you would! In all my long draught

of misery, this is the bitterest drop—that you should go away, probably to your death, thinking evil of me.”

“Put that idea out of your head for good,” he said, as she paused, silenced for the moment by another of those strangling sobs which cost her such an effort to subdue. “I don’t think evil of you, little madame; the worst I think of you is that circumstances have been against you from the start. My mother was speaking of you last night, and I understood a good deal of what had puzzled me before.”

“You mean——” she said, and stopped as Mrs. Mirfield’s skirts rustled warningly behind them.

He leaned toward her and murmured:

“I mean—Philpott. Hush! I don’t think a single hard thing of you, Molly, but I feel for you with all my heart.”

He had risen, and he gave her the engraving they had been talking across, and made a slight gesture toward the stand. She took the hint at once, and gained a few precious seconds in which to recover some semblance of an every-day demeanor before she faced the others. She hardly looked at George again. She heard him answering the good wishes of the others with an air of pleasant unconcern, and making light of the idea that there was any unusual risk or danger in this expedition to Burmah.

“At any rate, we won’t waste emotion over it to-night,” he said; “because, after all, my application may be refused at the Horse Guards, and I don’t want you to accuse me by-and-bye of having piled up the agony on false pretences.”

Molly did not follow them out to the hall with the others. She felt she had stood as much as she could. They just shook hands inside the room with everybody’s eyes on them, and then she waited by the door until the way was clear, and hurried away to the shelter of her own room, and sent a message to Charlotte which would keep her from coming to her, and locked the door, and fought out her trouble alone.

And a very wearing engagement she found it, judging by its effects upon her appearance during the time that followed.

CHAPTER XXV.

“IF YOU WANT A THING DONE DO IT YOURSELF.”

MRS. MIRFIELD insisted upon going back to town with George, that she might be able to see him now and again during his last few days in England.

He had plenty to do during those last days of bustle, but he contrived to always spend an hour or two with her, and she kept religiously in the hotel, fearful of missing one of his precious visits.

But when the trying good-bys were over, the last words said, and a dreadful calm had succeeded the incessant occupation of the preceding fortnight, the only task in which she found the least pleasure was recalling any wishes he had expressed, and doing her best to carry them out.

Among other things she called on her brother, to tell him that she had decided to drop the investigations into Mrs. Arthur's past, until George came back to conduct them for himself.

But here she had reckoned without her host.

Mr. Borthwicke's vindictive temper was thoroughly aroused over this business, and he did not mean to let the thing rest until either he or Molly de Courcy had established their case. On this point, however, he chose to keep his own counsel, for which course of proceeding he doubtless had very good reason. Doubtless, also, he had equally good reason for showing his sister more civility than he was in the habit of doing, and before the interview was over they had slipped into a positively confidential style of conversation.

It was during this confidential chat that Clem discovered why the campaign against Mrs. Molly was to be relinquished; and when he found that it was by George's wish it had been thrown up, his masculine understanding jumped at once to a conclusion on the matter. He had seen the young woman for himself, and he was no more blind than any other man. George's weakness for a pretty

face had got him into a confounded mess once already; as likely as not this was another instance of the old folly. Mrs. Molly's speaking eyes and fetching little smile had done the trick again for the young ass, and he had refused to be benefited at her expense. Certainly the magnitude of the act of self-renunciation was rather staggering, but then, most likely he had hopes of a reward in the sweet by-and-bye to buoy him up, and, meantime, he was not in reality losing anything during Lord Netley's lifetime.

There was one thing in the change of plan which put Clem's back fairly up, and this was the remembrance that when George chose to take the matter up for himself he would have the results of these previous investigations of his uncle's ready at hand to begin on. And perhaps this, more than any other consideration, made Borthwicke decide not to let the affair drop. Alice could draw back if she liked. He would go on and complete his case against Molly de Courcy to his own satisfaction, and then he would expose her or not, as circumstances might determine.

He devoted a lot of thought to the affair after that visit of Mrs. Mirfield's. It was a month now since Philpott had slipped through his hands in that unsatisfactory manner; a month since he had paid that last visit of his to Desmond's dressing-room, only to find out how thoroughly the cunning old actor had closed that road against any farther advance on his part.

It seemed rather a hopeless task to try any of that ground afresh, and yet in the absence of any other suggestions he took refuge in it once more. The next evening he had at liberty he took himself off to the Old Kent Road again, to see if there was any further information to be pumped out of Mr. Claxton.

His old ally, the young lady with the programmes, was still standing about in the passage at the back of the dress circle, as anxious to be obliging and as hoarse as ever.

From her he learned that Mr. Claxton had had "a tremendous slice of luck." A piece of his had been accepted for instant production at one of the West-end theatres—the "Portico," she believed it was. It was actually in rehearsal now, and consequently he did not get down to the Camel and Howdah as much as he used to do of an evening.

“It is very likely he may look in latish to-night, though,” she told him, “because I heard one of the ladies as is coming for the pantomime leave a message and a roll of music for him in the circle bar. She said she was sorry she could not wait to see him about the words of her songs; but she would try to get back again during the evening, so I expect he’s coming.” Upon the strength of this, Clem decided to stay. He went and left a message for Claxton at “the circle bar,” and resigned himself, with the best grace he could, to sitting out the evening’s entertainment.

And he had to sit it out to the very end, for when the curtain came down he was still there, awaiting the summons from Claxton.

But he knew something of the habits of the people connected with this particular theatre by this time, and he did not give his man up yet. Instead of going straight home when the performance was over, he turned into the passage leading off the main staircase to the bar. The gentlemen of the company, and some of the ladies too, were generally to be found here after the audience had dispersed; indeed, it was a kind of informal reception they held here after the labors of the evening, and the gathering often lasted some distance into the small hours. This was Claxton’s most likely time for turning up.

As Borthwicke turned into the bar passage he saw Claxton in front of him, going the same way. There was a lady with him; a youngish woman, in mourning, with a slender figure, a peculiar but not ungraceful swing in her walk, and a great quantity of yellow hair showing under her stylish little black hat.

“The pantomime lady, evidently,” Clem thought to himself, as he came along behind them, and then something happened which, to use his own delightful idiom, “knocked him into the midde of next week, and left him there without an idea to bless himself with.”

It was only that he overheard the finish of a sentence spoken by the lady with the golden hair, but, considering everything, it was such an extraordinary sentence for her to say:

—“and the very first use I make of it will be to run over to Leuville, and take a peep at the little one’s grave.”

Leuville! Clem was certain he had not made a mistake in the name. The name of the primitive, isolated little place on the Normandy coast, where Arthur Mirfield's married life had for the most part been passed. What an extraordinary coincidence that this man Claxton should number, among his circle of acquaintance, two people who knew this out-of-the-way place! The next moment Borthwicke was further astonished by Claxton's reply.

"If you'll take my advice, Molly, you'll do nothing of the sort," he said. "Do all you can to leave the past behind you, my dear; stick to Philpott by all means, like the little Briton you are, but forget the rest as fast as you can."

Borthwicke lost the answer to this. The passage narrowed just before the bar door was reached, and some thirsty souls at his side edged themselves in between him and Claxton and his companion. But he was so dazed with astonishment at what he had just heard that he was scarcely conscious of the unmerciful hustling. He felt as if he had been suddenly caught up in a whirlwind, and swung round and round in mid-air, and set down again with a thud, without breath or sense left in him.

What in the name of bewilderment and chaos did this thing which he had just overheard mean? This lady friend of Claxton's answered to the name of Molly, and she had something to do with Philpott, and she knew Leuville, and had some one dear to her buried there!

Was it likely that Claxton would have two lady friends who answered to all these particulars?

The very idea was preposterous! But then, how else could one account for what he had heard? Unless, indeed, the woman at Netley Fallow was a rank impostor all through, who was neither Mrs. Arthur Mirfield nor Mrs. Philpott, nor even Molly de Courcy, but some outsider who had stepped into the other woman's shoes when she chose to vacate them.

The possibility presented itself and vanished again with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. Just at the first glance the idea looked so improbable that his reason refused to accept it; his thoughts merely glanced that way and returned at once to the immediate present. He pushed his way

through the press of people flocking round the bar, till he found himself close to Claxton again.

He had found a seat for his companion in a quiet corner, away from the jabbering crowd round the counter, and was standing in front of her, talking. But to Borthwicke's disappointment they had entirely changed the topic of conversation. Their talk now was of theatrical matters pure and simple; and Clem, leaning his back against the wall just behind Claxton's shoulder, heard him advise the yellow-haired lady to “make the part as light as possible.”

“You are bound to be a bit rusty after your long rest,” he said, “and your anxiety may lead you to overact a little. Don't think about acting at all; don't attempt to make a character of it. Just speak and move and look as bright and brisk as a sparrow, and leave the part to take care of itself.”

Still Clem listened on in hopes of picking up some useful scrap of information, but he had his pains for nothing. The lady finished her biscuit and her glass of port, and pulled down her veil, and shook the crumbs from her black feather throat muffler, and put on her gloves, and took her departure through the fast-thinning throng without any further allusion to “the little one's grave at Leuville,” or to any other subject which at all interested the listener.

At her rising he moved away a little, so that Claxton should not suspect him of eaves-dropping, and then went forward to meet the playwright as if he had but just seen him.

“I've been here all the evening,” he said, wondering why Claxton looked so disturbed at the sight of him, “waiting to see you. I was almost giving you up when I caught sight of you up in the corner here, with your fascinating little friend. Is she an actress, Claxton?”

“Yes,” returned Claxton. “A Miss Cunningham, who is going to play the *soubrette* part in my new comedy at the Portico.”

“Miss Cunningham? Don't remember the name. Has she played much in town?”

“No; she was recommended to me by the manager she has been touring in the provinces with for the last year.”

"Cunningham," repeated Clem; "I remember now. I have heard the name before. What is the Christian name?"

Claxton flashed a quick glance at the questioner's shrewd, weasel-like face, but at that moment it bore such a transparent look of open inquiry that the suspicion faded from the other's eye at once.

"I don't know her Christian name," he answered; "she does not use it on the bills, and our acquaintance is of the slightest at present."

"Ah! The other name will follow later on, I suppose," Clem said, with a meaning leer.

He knew Claxton was not the kind of man to appreciate that sort of thing, but he was bound to make a pretence of some kind, to hide the conviction which had flashed upon him at the other's refusal to mention the lady's first name. He did not wish him (Clem) to know that her name was Molly. He must have some reason for troubling to make a secret of such a simple matter. He was also anxious to hide the fact that they were old friends—which they certainly were; how else could Claxton's allusion to her past be accounted for?—and there must be some weighty cause for this mystery over trifles. He would think it all out presently; just now his chief aim was to avoid arousing the other's suspicion as to his motive.

"She's an uncommonly taking little woman, as far as looks go," he continued, "and I dare say she's more taking still when you come to know her."

To which leading observation Claxton made no reply whatever.

"Have a drink?" he said, as a vacant space presented itself at the counter. "It is an abominable night outside; the fog is as thick as pea-soup, and not half as palatable. I should advise a drop of something warm to cheer the inner man before you make a start."

"Thanks," said Clem. "I'll drink to the success of the new piece; and the new actress, too," he added, with another of those offensive glances. "I hope she'll hit the public fancy, Claxton, for your sake."

"I hope so, most devoutly," Claxton answered, with an unruffled air, "considering that the success of the under-

plot depends entirely on the impression she makes on the audience.”

Clem grinned over the rim of his glass at this answer, but Claxton tasted his hot toddy in amiable unconsciousness of the significant look, and asked for a piece more sugar without a glance at his companion's face.

“I suppose,” said Borthwicke, after a time, “our old friend Philpott has not turned up again, since he gave Desmond the go-by in that rum fashion?”

“Philpott?” Claxton murmured, repeating the name with the air of a person who is casting back in his mind in search of a fleeting memory. “Now you speak of it, I don't believe I've seen him since the week Desmond was playing at the Greenwich theatre. But I did not know he had given Tom the go-by. How was it? Surely those two never fell out? They were always such close friends. You'd hardly think, to look at them, that there was only two or three years between them, would you?”

“I've never seen Desmond with a clean face, don't you see you know,” Borthwicke answered.

He was growing hugely dissatisfied with this interview. An idea was dawning upon him that Claxton knew exactly what he was driving at, and was playing him as easily as if he had been a half-pound trout at the end of a salmon line, and the notion was not conducive to an amiable state of mind. He saw plainly enough that, for some reason or another, Claxton was on his guard against him, and came to the conclusion that Philpott had asked him to hold his tongue. If that was so, it was no good his wasting any further time in exploring this part of the ground.

But when he was once out of Claxton's company, when he had no longer to devote his whole mind to the carrying on of a guarded conversation, when he was able to concentrate all his thinking power on the one subject, and began to puzzle over the real meaning of the events of the evening, he came to the conclusion that his time had certainly not been wasted.

This actress, whose Christian name was Molly, and who had a little one buried at Leuville, there must certainly be a connection of some sort between her and that other actress of the same Christian name, who had also a relative

buried at Leuville. When this idea presented itself to him now, and he had time to look it fairly in the face, he saw suddenly another possibility, side by side with it, which stunned him into absolute stillness.

He was alone in the fog on Waterloo Bridge at the moment the inspiration came to him, and he stopped abruptly and put his hand out gropingly toward the parapet, as if the shock of this sudden conviction had unsteadied his equilibrium.

George Mirfield was the only person who had investigated that portion of Molly de Courcy's past which had been spent at Leuville, and George Mirfield was the person who had used his influence to put a stop to the inquiry, and leave the pretty little schemer unmolested in the position she had gained for herself. What if George Mirfield had known the truth against her all the time, and had suppressed it? What if the woman and child at Netley Fallow had never had anything at all to do with the Honorable Arthur Mirfield? What if this Miss Cunningham was the real Molly de Courcy, the real Mrs. Philpott, who had contracted a bigamous marriage with Lord Netley's second son? What if Arthur Mirfield's little son was all this time lying in his grave in the Leuville churchyard, and George Mirfield knew it, and was conniving at the fraud that was being perpetrated? It was incredible, but was it absolutely impossible? There had never been a time in Clement Borthwicke's life when he could have been guilty of such a gigantic piece of folly, but he had heard of such things in his time. Once a man allowed a woman to make a fool of him there were no limits to his imbecility; he would go greater lengths at the bidding of his passion for a woman than he would go for any other motive under heaven.

The grave alluded to by this friend of Claxton's, was it the grave of Arthur Mirfield's child, and had George known it, and hidden it from his mother of set purpose?

Standing against the bridge parapet, with the chill, foul fog closing him in like a wall, through which the Westminster chimes, sounding the quarters, floated up sluggishly, Clem argued the question backward and forward, this way and that, until the belief that he was at last on

the direct route for the accomplishment of his purpose grew almost into a certainty.

He saw now the meaning of those reported sayings of Molly's concerning the falseness of her boy's position at Netley; he saw, too, the meaning of the little comedy in the hall at Netley Fallow, when Royston made his sudden appearance on the scene and noted with ever-increasing satisfaction how that event fitted in with his new theory.

That designing little minx had expected nothing less than instant exposure at the hands of Arthur Mirfield's old friend. Considering everything, Royston's magnanimity was positively astounding. He certainly carried the principle of minding his own business to its extremest limit. What could have been his motive for such extraordinary forbearance?

This brought up another branch of the question for Borthwicke's consideration: If this young woman was not Arthur Mirfield's reputed wife, who was she? Surely there must be some good reason why such men as Royston and Abney Garth should fight her battles for her? This part of the mystery, interesting enough in itself, was yet of no importance in its bearing on the main point at issue. So long as he could prove the young woman at Netley was not the Molly de Courcy whom Arthur Mirfield had married, it did not really matter in the least who she was; at any rate that was how Clem looked at the matter from his present point of view, and he thought he saw his way clearly enough to the attainment of this end now. The first time he found himself with two days to spare he would run across to Leuville himself, and do a little investigation on his own account. He had been a consummate fool to leave the matter as George had arranged it so long; it was another exemplification of Punch's time-honored advice—"If you want a thing done do it yourself."

CHAPTER XXVI.

CLEM DOES IT HIMSELF.

NOVEMBER was nearly out before Clem was able to spare the two or three days necessary for his trip to Leuville. Now that Mrs. Mirfield had backed out of the affair, all further expenses in connection with it would have to come out of his own pocket. Under these circumstances it was not worth his while to let it interfere with other and more paying concerns.

But the moment the opportunity did present itself he took advantage of it and went, and in spite of his excessively meagre knowledge of French, and the Normandy fisher-folks' complete ignorance of English, he contrived to find out sufficient to convince him that he was on the right track at last. He saw for himself the small grave in the cemetery, on the wind-swept headland above the village, and he managed to elicit the fact from Mme. Lorton that the wife of the Englishman who was buried in the cemetery had a splendid head of yellow hair.

To say that he was altogether and entirely charmed with the results of his trip would be a misstatement of the facts. Amid all his satisfaction there lurked a lingering annoyance at the past three months' delay. If, when his sister had first come to him early in September, to ask his assistance in exposing this woman's imposture, he had come straight over to Leuville, instead of running about after evidence of that previous marriage, the whole thing would have been brought to a climax, and the little swindler exposed, and forced to evacuate her position, before George appeared in the matter at all. That his nephew should have been one too many for him, that he should have been so easily hoodwinked by a youngster like that, was hurtful to Clem's self-conceit, inasmuch as for a time it lowered his opinion of his own cuteness.

Convinced in his own mind, as he now was, that the young woman at Netley was no more Arthur Mirfield's

widow, and the child no more Arthur Mirfield's little son than he was the Emperor of Morocco, there were one or two puzzling things even now which he could not keep out of his thoughts. Principal among these was the conduct of the real Molly all through the business. She it was who had rushed the removal from Thompson's Buildings, in order that Clem should not get at Philpott to take him down to Netley. She it was who had inspired the letter to Desmond, and put an end to Philpott's visits to the theatre, and no doubt it was in obedience to her wishes that Claxton had tried to hide the identity of Molly de Courcy with Miss Cunningham. But why?

What interest could the real Molly de Courcy have in concealing the imposture of the make-believe? There was a good deal, even yet, in this extraordinary case of fraudulent impersonation which Clem, with all his shrewdness, could not get at the bottom of, and Clem Borthwicke was one of those men who had a strong liking for knowing thoroughly the road he was going to travel.

As he journeyed back from his successful visit to Leuville, he formed the project of interviewing this Miss Cunningham, *alias* Molly de Courcy, *alias* Mrs. Arthur Mirfield, *alias* Mrs. Dick Philpott, on his own account, and getting from her some explanation of her extraordinary conduct in the affair, before he proceeded to finally demolish the imitation Molly de Courcy at Netley Fallow.

There was no difficulty whatever about carrying out this scheme. He bought a paper when he arrived at Charing Cross, and found out from the advertisements that Claxton's piece was being played at the Portico, and that Miss Cunningham was playing in it.

He got some dinner at one of the Strand restaurants, and then went down to the stage door of the Portico, and asked if Miss Cunningham was on until the end of the piece. Having ascertained that she was, and that the curtain was not down until ten minutes past eleven, he went away, and devoted the evening to other matters, and returned to the theatre in time to catch the little actress as she came out.

As he approached the stage door for the second time, down one of the silent, narrow streets at the back of the

Strand, he overtook a man going in the same direction, whose outlines seemed familiar to him. It was rather difficult to be certain of anything in the semi-obscurity of the shabby little thoroughfare, and it was not until a feeble hand came searching uncertainly for nothing along the edge of the back of his coat-collar that Clem was certain of his man.

Philpott, beyond a doubt, coming down to meet his wife—the wife “Molly,” of whom he had talked in the lunatic asylum; the wife of whose goodness and forbearance he had spoken with such confidence in the moment of his direst distress.

Clem hung back a little as they drew near the brilliant circle of light thrown by the lamp over the stage door, and heard the hall-keeper accost Philpott by name, and ask after his cough, and tell him that his wife would not be long.

Clem was not at all doubtful as to the result of the approaching interview. It would have been rather more convenient to have had the young woman to himself, perhaps; but, knowing all he knew, he would have undertaken to turn her mentally inside out had she been protected by a far more alarming personage than this broken-down old drunkard, with one foot already in the grave.

Standing a little back in the shadow, he watched several departures before the person he was waiting for arrived. He heard her before he saw her.

“Now, Dick, why did you come down to-night?” a bright voice sang out. “What a tiresome old chappie you are! You ought not to have put your nose outside the door on such a cold night as this.”

“It’s no good, Molly,” Philpott answered, as they both came out of the door into Clem’s view, and he recognized the undulating walk and the yellow hair of Claxton’s fascinating little friend; “it’s no good, my dear. I can’t sit the long evening through alone, and it comforts me to think that I am still of some little use to you. I know what the London streets are at night for a good-looking woman.”

“Oh, I’m too old a hand to be frightened about that,” she answered, shooting a sharp glance at Clem in the

shadow, as they passed him. "And you really ought not to have turned out to-night, Dick. This wind is enough to cut one in two."

"Who is it?" asked Philpott, as they went on down the quiet street. "Do you know him, Molly?"

"I could hardly see him," came the answer. "There is always somebody or another waiting about for somebody else of a night. Come, let's hurry, Dick; we may catch the half-past eleven 'bus from Waterloo Bridge if we make haste."

But here Clem interposed from behind.

"I beg your pardon! It is Mr. Philpott, *and Mrs.* Philpott, of course! I recognize the voice. The very people I was waiting to see."

They stopped short on being addressed, but when he moved on at their side they went on also, Mrs. Philpott glancing keenly at him from behind her veil, and palpably at a loss on the question of his identity.

"I have been referred to you for a little information on a business matter that I have in hand just now," he went on, doing his best to be reassuring; "nothing very alarming—perhaps it is more of an explanation than information that I want. Aren't we close to Gatti's here?" They were, in fact, not half-a-dozen yards from the back entrance of that place of public entertainment. "Shall we go in there, and have our little chat over a cigarette and a cup of chocolate for Mr. Philpott and me, and a little mulled wine for you, Mrs. Philpott? I've learned my lesson too well, don't you see you know, to suggest anything in the intoxicating line for the husband."

Mrs. Philpott gave a quiet assent to the arrangement. She did not know in the least who the little man with the sharp, brisk speech and the restless, bead-like eyes might be; but he was evidently an acquaintance of poor old Dick's, since he knew all about his compulsory abstinence. She followed without protest as he led the way to one of the most retired tables in the large, brilliantly lit room, which was already pretty full with the after-the-play-supper people. She managed to ask Dick, as they went, if he remembered who their unknown friend was; but he shook his head helplessly, and began to search his waistcoat pock-

ets, with both hands at once, as if he hoped to come across the missing means of identification there.

He had met him lately somewhere, he said; his face was quite familiar to him, and that was all he could remember on the subject. She did not bother him any further. The hospitable unknown was most likely some mere dressing-room acquaintance. Dick so often forgot people and names now; day by day the failure of memory increased upon him; it was one of the inexorable penalties of his past excesses.

Clem secured the table he wanted—the last one in a row, right up in a corner—and arranged the seating so that Mrs. Philpott had her back to the room, and then kept the talk on indifferent subjects until their needs had been supplied, and they were left in comparative seclusion. He meant, if possible, to surprise the truth out of his witness by the suddenness of his attack, and did not wish the whole room to become participators in the little scene.

“Now for my little inquiry,” he said, when the waiter had finally taken his departure and left them to themselves. “You will certainly think me a very inquisitive old party, Mrs. Philpott, but I have the very best of reasons for my curiosity, I assure you.”

He paused an instant to give fuller weight to what was coming, and then shot his bolt full at her, with his eyes steadily on her face.

“What has been your motive in allowing that woman at Netley Fallow to assume your name and rights for the last eighteen months?”

She did not answer him directly. She went very white, and her hand instinctively tightened its hold on her glass, but she said nothing for what seemed, in the emotion of the moment, to be quite a long time, but which was in reality only a few seconds. Then she drew a big breath, and said:

“Now I know who you are. You are the man who tried over a month ago to entice Dick down to Lord Netley’s place.”

“Of course!” exclaimed Dick, with a sudden flash of memory; but Clem cut short the interruption.

“Never mind that!” he said sharply; “give me a straight

answer to my question. What was your motive in helping to shield the woman who calls herself Arthur Mirfield's widow?"

"You're going a little too fast," she answered him, and he saw she was considerably shaken for all her show of unconcern. "It's not likely I should answer whatever questions a stranger chose to put to me, without knowing who he is or anything about him, especially when the questions are about other people's affairs. What do you mean by 'shielding people'? And what have I got to do with Arthur Mirfield's or any one else's widow?"

Mr. Borthwicke shook his head and smiled a very superior smile.

"That line is of no use at all to you, my dear girl," he said. "I'm not such a fool as to put a question like that to you unless I knew exactly what I was doing. I know everything there is to know—everything that is of importance, I mean, don't you see you know—and it was only to gratify my personal curiosity that I troubled to come to you to-night. I've this evening returned from Leuville, where I saw the grave of Arthur Mirfield's boy—your boy, too, of course—and the portrait which you gave to the old woman-servant at the little cottage on the hill of Arthur Mirfield, and his wife and child, in a family group. The picture hardly does you justice; still, it is meant for you as certainly as it is not meant for the stuck-up little fool who is passing herself off as Arthur's widow down at Netley. You see, the whole thing has burst up; the exposure will be as complete a thing as one could desire. What I said is the truth. Everything that is important to the case I know. Whether you speak or hold your tongue makes not the faintest difference to the main point; only I was curious to know how you had been persuaded into standing on one side while another woman collared all the advantages which you might have claimed for yourself. I said to myself that there must be some powerful reason for such a supernal piece of unselfishness as all that, and I was curious to know what it was."

"Molly was always unselfish," Dick put in; but she turned and silenced him at once.

"You don't know what we're talking about, old boy,"

she said, with kindly peremptoriness, "and you may do a lot of harm without meaning it, so just hold your tongue for a little while."

"Very good, my dear!" he answered, with a smile which was heart-breaking, because of its unsuccessful attempt to conceal his knowledge of his own mental deficiency. "She is the head of the firm now, sir; I am only the sleeping partner."

She put her hand across the table and laid it on his, as she turned again to Clem.

"You are very keen to find out the motive of my conduct in this business. Suppose I change places with you for a moment, and ask you what is your interest in the matter?"

He answered without an instant's hesitation:

"I am acting for the next in succession, failing issue in the direct line, my nephew, George Mirfield."

"Oh! Then I suppose you have some right to stir up the family puddle," she said, speaking, all the same, as if, even while admitting it, she grudged him the right; "but you can't compel me to help you in the unfortunate business, and so I think I'll bid you good-night. Come along, Dick!"

But he made a quick gesture to her to keep her seat.

"Stop a minute," he said hastily; "don't be in such a hurry. You may as well hear what I've got to say, now you are here. If you go off in a huff like that, as likely as not you'll be sorry for it before you're a week older."

She dropped back into her chair and waited.

"You see, it's this way," he went on. "I tell you candidly that at this present moment, with all I have discovered against that mealy-faced little impostor fresh in my mind, nothing would please me better than to go in with a rush and drive her bang back on the ropes—I'm that savage at the way she's fooled the Mirfields all this time. But it seems to me that you must know of some extenuating circumstances in her case; else why, in the name of common sense, should you have given her this pull on Arthur Mirfield's relations? Well, if you do know anything that will tell to her credit, now is the time to out with it. I don't say that it will make me stop dead in what I am

doing, but I will say this: If there was any sort of an excuse for her conduct I might—I don't say I *would*, but I *might*—give her a chance of getting out of the way quietly, before the grand show-up comes off; so if you're anxious to do her a good turn your best plan is to speak out."

He saw plainly enough that he had shaken her resolution to keep silence at all costs, and hastened to add another argument in favor of speaking—an argument which, because it would have told heavily with himself, he expected would tell with her.

"And there is another thing to be considered in the affair—your own well-being. Do you know that in fathering this woman's imposture you are laying yourself open to the risk of an action at law, for conspiring to defraud."

"That part of the business doesn't frighten me a bit," she answered at once. "When I undertook to keep myself out of the way I was told that no harm could possibly come to me, even if the whole thing was discovered, and I'd trust Mr. Garth not to make a promise of that sort unless he——"

She checked herself suddenly, warned by his roused look of what she had done.

"So it was Garth who influenced you," he said. "Come, we're getting on! I always knew he was one of the chief movers in the conspiracy; but it's reassuring to have one's convictions verified. And he promised you that you should not suffer for helping him brew this kettle of broth, did he? Of course what he meant was that he would keep you out of the show-up altogether. But the matter will no longer be in his hands, don't you see you know, and it strikes me you'll have to dance to the piping of an altogether different person, and to an altogether different tune, before the thing is done with. And besides, after all is said and done, what's the good of holding back now? The game is fairly played out. All there is to know against this young woman, so far as the fraud on Lord Netley goes, I know. Your motive for taking part with her would, I imagine, tell for her rather than against her; so why should you make such a secret of it?"

"That's true enough." She was looking thoughtful now; he saw the indecision in her good, steadfast, brown

eyes, and left her to it. "It was partly out of pure gratitude to Mr. Garth," she went on slowly, "and partly because I was so sorry for the poor soul herself—she had been so cruelly wronged. Lord Mirfield promised her marriage, and then allowed his father to persuade him into marrying another lady."

"Who—who promised her marriage?" gasped Borthwicke, letting his cigarette fall from his loosened fingers, and gaping open-mouthed across the table at her.

"Lord Mirfield—Lord Netley's eldest son. He wronged her cruelly, and she was scarcely more than a child, Mr. Garth told me. Her father was a tenant-farmer, holding a farm under a friend of Lord Mirfield's. He met her while he was staying at his friend's house, and persuaded her to run away with him."

"Good God!" gasped Clem, and sat silent; for once in his life too overcome for words.

"You see it all fell out so curiously," she continued. "I always believed I was Arthur's wife, until I came to look through his papers after his death, and then I found a letter from Dick here, to me, telling me that I had really been Mrs. Philpott all the time. You know all about that, I suppose?"

Clem summoned enough presence of mind to nod his head, and she went on, obviously relieved not to be compelled to go into the details of that cowardly crime in the presence of the perpetrator.

"Well, I had just found this letter—which poor Arthur had kept back from me—I had just realized the fact that I had no sort of claim on Lord Netley, when Mr. Garth arrived from England to take me back home to Netley Fallow. Of course I told him my exact position, and he was very good to me. No, I won't bother you with that part of the story," she said briskly, in reply to a slight movement from Clem; "you don't look the sort of man to appreciate the account of another man's goodness. I'll go straight on. Mr. Garth would not hear of leaving me. He brought me back to London, and if I had been a princess of the royal blood he could not have treated me with more consideration. I had set my face against going among the Mirfields, but he would not lose sight of me.

Lord Netley would care for me, he said, and it was not to be thought of that I should place my life in Dick's hands again. We had scarcely arrived in London when Mr. Garth was fetched away to Lord Mirfield's deathbed; he had been fatally hurt in a railway accident, and he died that night.

"When Mr. Garth came back to me the next morning, the change in him frightened me; he looked like an old man. He told me he had been up all night with Lord Mirfield, and that with his dying breath he had begged him to save the woman he had wronged from the consequences of his wickedness. And then Mr. Garth asked me to let this ill-treated woman take the place which had been prepared for me among Arthur's people. Nobody at Netley knew me by sight—nobody knew that my baby was dead. It would be harming nobody to let these other poor creatures take my place, and the place of my dead baby, and it would be doing a real justice in the sight of God. In any case he should hold himself responsible for my future comfort, he said; but if I would do this I should lay him under an obligation which he could never repay.

"Well, I consented. I had no rights of my own to resign, you see, so that it was a cheap piece of generosity after all. This other lady and her child were to go down to Lord Netley as Arthur's child and wife, late Molly de Courcy, and I was to stay behind as Mrs. Somebody-else. And, what is more, I don't believe the trick would ever have been found out if I had not happened to meet Dick, a month or six weeks ago, looking so ill and wretched that I could not leave him to himself any longer. It was the first time I had seen him since I married Arthur Mirfield, and the change in him horrified me so much that I couldn't go back to the comfortable home Mr. Garth had found for me, and leave him to die like a dog, alone, in the gutter, and so we've made up our minds to see the rest of it out together."

"May I never advance another penny at good interest if you're not an out-and-out trump!" said Clem. "You women are rum beggars to understand. Well, you've astonished me over this business and no mistake. You have created a regular *bouleversément*, as our friend Mme. Lor-

ton would say, in my ideas. I'm dashed if I can see what my next step will be! One thing you may be quite satisfied of—that you've not injured that unlucky little woman's case by speaking out. She shall, at all events, have the chance to get away quietly, whether she chooses to take it or not. It does make a difference to know that the boy is really the child of the eldest son, although he was born on the wrong side of the sheet. Great Scot! what a row there will be between the two women when Lady Mirfield finds out who the little 'un is! Yes, I certainly will give her the chance of clearing out before I blow the gaff on the whole business."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Philpott; "I'm glad of that. After all Mr. Garth's kindness to me, I shouldn't like to think I had harmed anybody he took an interest in."

"Well, then," began Clem, and stopped, and went on again. "If you and Mr. Philpott have been together ever since he came away from Redcross—and now I come to reckon back, you must have met within a day or two of his discharge from there—what did he go down to Cramlingford for?"

"Cramlingford? When?"

"Why, within a week or two of his leaving the asylum."

"Dick has never been out of London since he came out of Redcross."

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite."

Clem looked staggered. Here was another puzzling problem. Who was the man who had put up at the Cramlingford inn, and busied himself so curiously about the past histories of the ladies at Netley Fallow? Until now he had always thought it was Philpott. Since it was not he, the question presented itself, Who was it?

Mrs. Philpott glanced at the clock, and began to arrange her veil in the opposite mirror, and signed to Philpott to finish his chocolate.

"My friend Mr. Claxton will chaff me finely about this meeting with you," she said. "He told me I should not find it so easy to bury Molly de Courcy as I seemed to think, and he was right. If you see Mr. Garth in the course of this business, will you do me the favor of explain-

ing to him that I would never have risked discovery by returning to the stage, but for my husband's ill-health. There was no other way in which I could earn enough for the two of us, you see."

"Yes, I see," answered Clem, with a sudden extraordinary impulse of admiration; "and I see that, no matter who is to blame, you have behaved like a heroine from beginning to end. I've never introduced myself to you properly, Mrs. Philpott, but my name is Borthwicke—Clement Borthwicke, of Gray's Inn—and I should like very much to shake hands with you, if you have no objection."

She looked a little surprised, and perhaps a little amused, but she gave him her hand without the least hesitation, and bid him a cordial "Good-night," and tucked one of her husband's lost-looking hands snugly under her arm, and marched him off steadily down the long room, between the rows of little tables, looking neither to the right nor left, and neither seeing nor heeding the looks of recognition which two or three supping parties bestowed on her as she went.

And Clem Borthwicke, watching her, felt, for the first and last time in his life, a twinge of genuine sentiment, and said to himself, with a touch of incredulous astonishment, that he supposed there must be something after all in a woman's love, else how could her conduct to that despicable old blackguard be accounted for.

It was a long walk to take in the small hours, from the top of the Strand to Gray's Inn, but Clem walked it that night.

He wanted to think, and the rattle of a hansom is at no time conducive to coherent meditation. And so he tramped his way steadily across the heart of London, and had his argument out with himself in peace.

He was not, perhaps, an admirable nor even an estimable man, but neither was he a veritable ogre; and he found it impossible to think so badly of Molly, or even to wish so unreservedly for her downfall, now that he knew the nature of her claim on the Mirfield family. He was sorry for her, and, after his discoveries at Leuville, that was a state of mind he had never expected to find himself in.

He understood Royston's conduct now. He remembered that gentleman's allusion to his visit to Lord Mirfield's yacht. He had undoubtedly seen Molly there, and had known exactly whom he was befriending when he fathered the poor little woman's imposture. It was true enough that there was still a smouldering resentment against Royston in Clem's mind, but even so it seemed to him that that "starchy old party" had shown a remarkably decent feeling in acting as he had done.

How he, Clem Borthwicke, was to act now remained an open question—a very open question. He reached home before he had arrived at any decision on the point, and sleep overtook him while he was still casting about in his mind for some middle course, which should insure ultimate justice to George, while protecting Molly from the shame and degradation of a public exposure.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TELEGRAM FROM REDHEAD.

As far as Molly's—she always remained "Molly" to the end of the chapter with those who had first known her by that name—as far as Molly's own welfare was concerned, it was perhaps a good thing that her time was so occupied after George's departure that she had no leisure in which to dwell upon her own sorrows.

Lord Netley's constitution was breaking up rapidly. The evening George dined at the Fallow was his last appearance downstairs, and as the end approached he hankered after the companionship of Molly and her boy more and more, until it ended in a bedroom being fitted up for them in that wing of the house, so that Molly could get an hour or two's rest, just as the old man could spare her, without ever being beyond call.

The little woman certainly got pale under this close confinement, but she did not get wretched and despairing and desperate, as she might have done if left to the contemplation of her own heart troubles. The quiet, cheery bear-

ing she cultivated for the invalid's benefit reacted on her for her own, and she found that, since it was God's will that this grief should darken her life, she was able to endure it, and even to smile under it, deep as the hurt was, and lasting as it was likely to be.

Day by day she sat in Lord Netley's half-darkened room—his last shred of well-bred vanity had forsaken him now; he no longer offered any opposition to the coming and going of those he loved in his room. As she sat hour after hour by the bedside of the dying man, he opened his whole heart and mind to her, and day by day her gladness increased at her own reticence concerning the past.

"I am glad Arthur married you," he said on one of these occasions. "When I first heard of it, I was infamous enough to say to myself that he was a fool to have gone to such a length as marriage; that doubtless you could have been managed without such a sacrifice as that; but, as I lie here now, and feel the end drawing nearer and nearer, it is an untold comfort to me to be able to think that neither of my sons had such a weight on their souls as poor George Mirfield has. It must be an awful memory to a man to know he has been the ruin of an innocent woman—awful, at least, when he draws near to death, and sees such things with the clearer vision which comes with his near approach to his Maker."

And Molly, listening to this, and to many another speech like it, felt at last that she had done well to hold her peace about her wrongs.

"I was very severe on George," he said, at another time. "Simply because he was the son of his mother I had never liked him, and when everybody lifted up their hands and called him hard names, I was one of the harshest of all his judges. Now that I begin to feel the need of mercy myself, I wish I had been more merciful to him; but that was always where I failed. I have always been too implacable. I have not even mentioned his name in my will, Molly, but—it would be easy enough to add a codicil. Should you begrudge him a few thousands of my savings, and would you object to him as co-trustee with Abney, to look after the estate during our boy's minority?"

Molly's answer to this can be easily guessed at; her only

difficulty was not to let him see how overjoyed she was at the suggestion.

"Whether the change was more in him or in me, I can't tell," he went on, "but he seemed to me very much altered for the better when he dined here the other night. He had lost some of his old, defiant recklessness; there was a touch of consideration for other people's little failings, which was something altogether new in my experience of him. At his very worst he was always a good fellow to his mother, but it was something of an improvement to see him patient and good-natured under Kennett's patronage and Codrington's pedantry. I should like to show some sign of my improved opinion of him."

So Abney was spoken to about the matter, for in these days Abney stood quite in the position of son of the house; and, having given his unqualified approval to the scheme the lawyer was sent for, and the necessary addition was made to Lord Netley's testamentary arrangements.

And scarcely a week after the codicil had been added the end came, and came so quietly that the nurse, sitting in a light doze by the head of the bed, could hardly believe in the reality of it until she had applied her tests.

Molly and Abney, being the nearest at hand, were the first ones summoned, and when they were left for a brief moment by the bedside, with all that was left of their stanch friend before them, Molly spoke through her quiet tears.

"So that is over," she said, "and part of my oath to the dead has been carried out to its fullest accomplishment. I never betrayed Lionel to his father by word nor deed; but the deceit has pressed very heavily upon me sometimes. If my love for the poor, childless old man had not been so deep and strong, I don't think I could have gone through with it. What a friend he was, Abney! If he never forgave a wrong, he never forgot a favor. Friendship was something more than an empty word with him!"

"I need to be told that least of all the world," answered Garth, with pale, firm-set lips. "Did ever man have a better friend, since men have lived, than I had in him? It would not be possible. He was a man of few faults and great virtues. Now that they have lost him, people will

find out what grand qualities he had. There was something heroic, even about his failings; he was a warrior to the core of his heart, but he never fought unfairly. When Mr. Royston was here he told me some anecdotes of his doings when in office. He said the main secret of the success of his department was the confidence of the opposition. He was a bitter enemy, but his animosity was as straightforward as his policy was outspoken. I expect we of this generation will be astonished when we read some of the things that will be said of him now he is gone."

And they were, but not just then, for in the days succeeding his death circumstances combined to centre their thoughts very much upon their own private affairs. It was not until later on that they found time to take pleasure in the tributes paid by a large-minded press to the excellences and abilities of the head of their house.

Clement Borthwicke was among the people upon whom the news of the death came with an unpleasant shock, because he saw that, if he meant to move at all in the matter of establishing George's claim, now was the time to do it. It was singularly unfortunate, from his point of view, that the event should have happened just now. If it had happened a little earlier, before he had found out the truth about the reputed heir and his mother, he would have gone in without the slightest compunction and shown her up. If, on the other hand, it had happened a month or two later, his compassion for the unfortunate young woman would have had time to cool, and he might not have found the task of turning her boy and her out of Netley so exceedingly distasteful as he did just now. He felt it was excessively rough on him that he should be called upon to do this thing, just at the time when he felt such an unusual desire to be merciful.

This feeling was so strongly on him that it is even possible that he might have consented to stand aside altogether, and leave things to take their course, as George had requested, until his return from India, but for a certain combination of events, which forced his hand in spite of him.

On the third evening after Lord Netley's death—a Saturday evening—he received a telegram from Redhead, the landlord of the inn at Cramlingford.

"The man you want is here, has opened communications already with Mrs. A. M. Am trying to prevent meeting until your arrival. Waste no time."

The receipt of this telegram flurried him, because he could not understand what it meant, and in this flurry he decided by all means to go down to Cramlingford. In any case it was better to be on the spot and see what was going on.

What was puzzling him now was the individuality of the man at the Cramlingford inn, and the motive of his desire to see the poor little woman at Netley Fallow. It was evidently somebody who knew all there was to know, and who was seeking an opportunity to make a good market for his knowledge. The news of Lord Netley's death had probably warned him that this opportunity had arrived, and he had lost no time in getting on the field of action.

Well, if there was to be a gigantic show-up, Clem felt that, having wasted so much time and thought over the precious business, he had a kind of right to be in at the death; so he decided to get down as soon as he could and see for himself how things were going. As it happened he was out until late on the Saturday evening when the telegram from Redhead arrived, and so missed that night's mail. He had had experience of the slow Sunday trains already, but there seemed to be no help for it, unless he waited patiently for the Monday traffic, and this he did not feel inclined to do.

And, thanks to his impatience, he did get down in time to see the finish, though not in time to prevent the meeting between old Dick Redhead's mysterious guest and the ladies at the Fallow.

For, at the very moment that the telegraph boy was handing Redhead's message over to the care of the lodge-keeper at Gray's Inn, Molly was in conversation with the unknown stranger, beyond the shrubberies which enclosed the ladies' lawn at Netley.

The afternoon post, being a local delivery only, seldom brought much news to Netley Fallow; but during the few days following Lord Netley's death, every post that arrived

brought shoals of condolences from the Yorkshire people of all classes and grades.

Molly, as the mother of the new earl, received as many of these epistles as Charlotte, and it was among a dozen or so of these that she found, on Saturday afternoon a letter which was neither a formally worded expression of condolence nor an undertaker's business circular. When she first read the name signed at the bottom, this communication caused her such a hideous shock that she started from her chair, and was out of her little sitting-room and at the end of the corridor leading to the main staircase before she knew what she was about.

She would perhaps have run out of the house just as she was, bareheaded, in her long crimson dressing-gown, into the frosty keenness of the December dusk, and thereby have created a lot of chatter among the servants, if, as she opened the swing-door at the end of the corridor, she had not caught sight of Parker, soft-footed, slow, and solemn, coming from the direction of the room where Lord Netley lay.

The sight of the man's ponderous dignity checked her reckless advance at once. Instinctively she drew back out of sight, and in that moment's pause recollected the need for keeping up appearances.

She went back to her room, dazed and trembling, but on her guard.

This man's reappearance just now was a veritable thunderbolt, and what made it so much worse was its utter unexpectedness. Nothing in the whole world had been farther from her thoughts at this moment than any attack from that quarter; it found her utterly unprepared, and utterly and entirely defenceless. Abney was in London, seeing after the funeral arrangements, and would not be back until early on Monday morning, and, in the change of circumstances resulting from Lord Netley's death, she hardly knew what course to pursue until she had consulted with him.

And yet she must see this man at once, within the next hour, or he would carry out the threat of his letter: march into the hall downstairs, summon the whole household with a thunderous clanging of the big gong, and denounce

her for what he knew her to be—the mistress of the late Lionel, Lord Mirfield, the woman who had stood between Lord Netley's eldest son and his lawful wife, who had alienated his heart from its legitimate object, and made Charlotte's married life an empty husk, of which she alone knew the barrenness and the soul-hunger.

Molly's knees shook under her as she thought of the horror of the moment, thought of herself standing alone in the dimly lit hall, with that circle of shocked faces shrinking loathingly away from her neighborhood; most of all she flinched at the thought of the look that would come into Charlotte's beautiful frank eyes, as she heard of the involuntary treachery of which Molly had been guilty—the treachery of stealing Lionel's heart from the woman who had loved him so dearly, from the woman who had a claim upon his affections long prior to any claim which Molly had ever had. Would Charlotte ever forgive this treachery, involuntary though it was? Molly believed not. Most of all, she would find it hard to forgive if the news was hurled at her in this brutal, melodramatic manner, without the faintest preparation, by this greedy, ill-conditioned rascal, who was awaiting Molly now in the drive, half-way between the house and the lodge gates.

If Abney had only been here to go with her, or, better still, to go for her, and satisfy the claims of this rapacious ruffian, and get him quietly out of the way.

The unhappy, persecuted little woman's hands shook so horribly that it took her a full half-hour to change her shoes and her dress, and wrap herself in a long, warm, dark cloak; her fingers fumbled so piteously over the buttons and hooks that once she sat down suddenly in the midst of fastening her dress, and burst into helpless tears. But she was up again in a moment, braced up to her repugnant task by the recollection of the consequences which would inevitably follow upon her neglect of it.

This time she stole very quietly along the corridor. She heard the children's happy laughter as she passed the nursery door—neither she nor Charlotte had committed the folly of trying to impress their baby minds with the solemnity surrounding them; they had not even allowed the daylight to be shut out of their gayly papered play-room—

and she paused a moment before letting the noiseless swing-door fall to behind her, as if she were reluctant to shut off the sound of their merry baby voices.

And she had good reason: for when the door was closed, and she was alone on the large, dim, silent main staircase, the idea seized upon her over-wrought imagination that henceforth she was to be shut off from all the joy and brightness of her past life; that ahead of her lay a future of darkest doom, of which the big, stately, solemn hall before her seemed the fitting symbol.

The fancy grew so strong that her teeth began to chatter audibly in her head, until she had to hold her shaking jaw in both hands to still the clatter; and in this attitude she hurried, with noiseless speed, down the wide stairs and through the two halls, into the sharp outer air.

The sudden change of atmosphere, from the well-warmed house to the outside frost, had a good effect on her nerves. She waited a moment at the foot of the steps to steady herself, and then, drawing her cloak close across her chest, she walked on quietly, out of sight from the main entrance, in the direction of the lodge gates.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

REDHEAD'S VISITOR SPEAKS OUT.

THE man who was waiting for her seemed to be thoroughly familiar with her figure and walk, judging by his quick recognition of her as she approached the tree behind which he was hiding in the dusk.

"Here I am, Mrs. Mirfield," he said, stepping forward into the roadway in front of her. "I was afraid I might let you pass in the dark; but I need not have worried myself—I should have known your footstep anywhere. You've been a long time coming. I began to think you had made up your mind to drop the little game you've been playing ever since Lord Mirfield's death, and face out the exposure."

She caught her breath at his sudden appearance, but when she spoke her voice was resolutely still and steady.

"Shall you keep me long?" she said, "because we shall be seen here. If this compromise, which your letter suggests, is likely to take long to arrange, we had better go somewhere more out of the way."

"Very good!" he answered. "You know the anchorage here better than me. I'll follow your piloting."

She turned at once and led the way, by the narrow side path and through the gate with the intricate latch, to the ladies' lawn. She went on, round the far side of the open space, and did not stop until she had gone some distance down the shrubbery path, in the direction of the ha-ha.

"I think we are safe enough here," she said, "but should be very glad if you would be as quick as you can with what you have to say, Maxon. I don't want the whole household to find out my absence. Lord Netley is lying dead in the house; they would wonder at my being out at all at such a time."

"And you was always given to studying appearances, I remember," he answered. "That's what took the whole crew in so thoroughly. I can tell you I was that astonished when I found out the truth that I could hardly believe my eyes. You've been extraordinary clever over this business, Mrs. Mirfield, I will say that for you. I reckon myself a rather smart hand, but you've had me fairly, and I don't mind confessing to it. I never had the least suspicion of you till about six weeks ago, when I came down here to ask a little help from you; and when I found out your little game, you might literally have knocked me over with a feather."

"Never mind about all that now," she said, and the effort it cost her to speak patiently was apparent in the labored quietness of her voice; "you have found me out, and that is enough. Let me hear what this compromise is, and tell me as quickly as possible."

"Did Lady Mirfield tell you she had seen me, that time about six weeks ago, and given me ten pounds? When I went back to the inn, after that talk with her, and found out that there had been another Lady Mirfield here, all the time that you and my young lord were cruising about the coast in that happy fashion, I was that flabbergasted that I couldn't see my way clear at all. Of course I set to

work making inquiries at once, and I've heard that you are passing here as the widow of the second son; but it passes me altogether to understand how you have managed it so neat. I wonder what you did with the real woman? I've found out that Lord Mirfield had no son by his wife, and I see your little game plainly enough—you want his illegitimate boy to inherit the title and the property. Well, an earldom and a place like this 'ere is worth a good price anyway."

Molly moaned a little and moved her feet impatiently on the path. They could not see one another's faces in there, under the shadow of the high laurels and acubas; but one could imagine the torture on hers from the sound of her voice when she spoke again.

"I wish you would say exactly what you want, and let me know the worst."

"Well, the truth is that I can't tell you just to a hundred pounds or so what I do want. There is a hotel at Leeds that I want to buy; it will be in the market shortly, but the price hasn't been published yet."

Molly laughed, a queer little hysterical laugh, which considerably discomposed her companion.

"I don't know much about the prices of hotels," she said, "but certainly I should not think you have put too low a value upon your silence. Suppose I tell you, Maxon, that what you ask is impossible? I know pretty well how I am left under Lord Netley's will. This place is to be kept up properly for my boy and me during his minority, but I have nothing whatever to do with the expenditure; that is entirely in the hands of the trustees. I have five hundred a year left to me for my life, and that is the only money that I have any control over."

"Well, then, I call it a damned beggarly arrangement," he ejaculated, and she began to shake again at the change in his tone. His disappointment was making him savage and reckless. "I shall have to carry my goods elsewhere, that's all. If you can't pay me my price, perhaps Lady Mirfield can. I've heard that she is a tremendously rich woman in her own right. I expect she'd be willing to give a good deal to keep this scandal against her dead husband from oozing out."

Molly groaned again, and rocked herself to and fro, with her arms clasped tightly across her breast.

"I should advise you to think it over a bit," he said.

"Think it over?" she echoed. "What is the use of thinking it over? Can you squeeze blood from a stone? I have told you the absolute truth about my circumstances."

"Can't you square the trustees?" he asked. "Can't you get them to let you have four years or so of your income down in a lump? Tell them straight out that it is some secret of your past life that you want to keep quiet. They won't be very surprised; everybody about here knows that the second son married an actress. They will think it is some scrape connected with your theatrical life that you want to hide. At any rate I should say it was worth thinking over."

"How long will you give me to think it over?" said Molly, and there was a new note in her voice which he took for a sign of yielding.

"I'll give you till to-morrow night to make up your mind whether you will try to get the money," he answered; "and if you decide to try, I'll give you a clear fortnight afterward to work the trustees. I don't want to be unreasonable, nor yet hard-hearted."

She thought a moment before she spoke again.

"Give me until Monday night to make up my mind," she said then; and he, in his mean craftiness, jumped at once to the conclusion that there was some stronger motive behind the request than the mere delay of twenty-four hours, and decided on the spot to deny her what she asked.

"No," he said, "I can't do that. I want to get back to Leeds by an early train on Monday. I'll give you till this time to-morrow night, and no longer. If you haven't made up your mind by then I shall take my own course, and do the best I can for myself elsewhere."

"By which you mean Lady Mirfield?"

"Never you mind what I mean," he returned knowingly. "I am giving you the first chance; if you don't choose to take it, it is no concern of yours what I do afterward. And look here, Mrs. Mirfield," he added, as if a fresh thought had but just occurred to him, "don't you

go trying any tricks to frighten me, or you'll repent it. If you go raking up that old nonsense about the plate that went missing off the yacht, or anything of that kind—if you try to get rid of me in any way, I swear to you by the living Lord that I will advertise the facts of this very pretty little affair far and wide. As things stand now, it is possible that, even if you won't raise the money, it may suit Lady Mirfield's book to have the story kept quiet; but if you've got any plan in your head for getting me shut up and out of the way, I advise you to drop it. So surely as anything of that kind takes place, I'll never rest till your name is in every gossiping society paper in the country, and so I give you fair warning."

"I was not thinking of it," she said when he paused, breathless with the hurry of his speech. "I had forgotten all about the missing silver; and in any case it is not likely, unless I meant to confess to everything, that I should let people know that I am aware of what took place on Lord Mirfield's yacht."

"And that you don't mean to do?" he insinuated, half interrogatively.

And she repeated:

"And that I don't mean to do just now, certainly."

As she spoke she was arranging in her own mind how she should keep this hideous secret at all costs from Lotte, until she and Abney were married. It would be easier for Lotte to forgive her when they were no longer under the same roof—for Abney had already decided upon a residence in London during the greater part of the year. When Lotte had a very happy home of her own, of which she held the undivided sovereignty, and a husband who almost made up, by his all-pervading love, for the cold disappointment of her first married life—when she had fairly realized her own great happiness, and knew that Molly was living a lonely, empty life in the big Yorkshire house, surely she would find it easier to forgive her this great involuntary wrong. For the certainty was coming home to her now that, sooner or later, her secret would have to be known. Indeed, there was a wonder in her mind that she had been able to maintain the position she had taken up as long as she had.

If she could but gain a little time, was the one overpowering thought in her mind as she stood there in the shadow of the bushes, driving her bargain with the man who had sprung up, like an avenging spirit, out of her most unhappy past. But, metaphorically, his hand was at her throat and his grip in her purse, and it was more than her courage was equal to, to plump out a downright refusal to his request.

And so the poor, badgered, bewildered little creature yielded to his demand for another interview on the Sunday evening, and gave some sort of an assent by implication to his injunction to make up her mind as to what she meant to do between now and then, though she knew well enough that nothing that was likely to help her to a decision could possibly happen in the next twenty-four hours.

And having brought her to this pitch of submission he allowed her to return to the house.

All that evening she and Lotte and the two children spent in her little sitting-room. Dinner was served to the two ladies up there, and the babies were made happy by a pudding prepared expressly for them. After the mites had gone to bed the two women sat, on either side of the fire, and talked; and the talk grew more confidential in that snug little chamber than would have been possible in the large, handsome rooms downstairs.

And, for some unknown reason, Lotte spoke more of her first husband to-night than, in Molly's knowledge of her, she had ever spoken before.

"His father never guessed ever so faintly at the want of sympathy between us," she said, "and it will always be a source of comfort to me to remember that he never suspected it. It was strange that it should have been so, you know, Molly, because I simply worshipped poor Lionel at that time; and it would have been only natural if I had won a little affection in return. But I did not—never a shred, my dear. Looking back now I sometimes wonder if——" She paused and looked across at Molly's tired, patient little face, as if she wanted a sign of encouragement to go on; but she did not get it, and she had to finish her sentence without. "It seems dreadful to hint at slander against the dead, but I can't help sometimes wondering if—

there was another woman in the case. It's an awful thing to say, I know, but Lionel was naturally of such a clinging, gentle disposition that I don't see how else to account for his coldness to me."

And Molly listened patiently, thinking her own sad thoughts meanwhile.

Lionel had not been cold to her; his love had been capricious, subject to fits of hot, unreasonable anger, followed by periods of childish estrangement, but cold he had never been.

Poor Lionel, and poor Charlotte, and poor Molly! If Lionel had been just a little stronger-minded, or the poor old man who was lying upstairs just a little less masterful!

But what they had to reckon with now was events as they had happened, not as they might have, and Molly found it very hard to make up her mind what to do for the best.

And then, on the Sunday morning, came what she hoped and believed was a bit of good news.

Abney was coming back that afternoon instead of the next morning. The thought lifted a whole world of trouble off her shoulders. She could trust Abney to work any kind of incredible wonder on her behalf. Let him once have an interview with this old steward of Lord Mirfield's, and Molly believed she would never be troubled by the disreputable ruffian again. But did she dare to wait for him?

Her appointment with Maxon was for half-past five, in the same place as last night, and Abney could not reach the Fallow until half-past six. Did she dare to risk putting that churlish brute into a rage for an hour? Surely he could not do much harm in that space of time!

And then she did so heartily dread another interview with the obnoxious wretch. She shrank so repugnantly from the repetition of his coarse familiarity and his detestable innuendoes, and at last it ended in a decision to trust to chance.

Maxon would wait for her at the appointed place until six o'clock certainly, and once let Abney reach home before Maxon carried out his threat of exposure, and she could trust her friend to manage the whole affair just as he chose.

And the event would have fully justified her trust in her champion and protector but for one trifling consideration—Lady Mirfield's impatience to see her sweetheart after their two days' separation; an impatience of which she was secretly a little ashamed.

As it drew on toward six o'clock Molly made the excuse of dressing—though of course they were not dressing during this period of close seclusion—to get away from Lady Mirfield's room, so that she and Abney might get their greetings over in peace. And the moment that Charlotte was sure Molly was safely off, she wrapped herself up and made a bee-line for the lodge gates, meaning to walk back to the house with her lover.

But, after all, Abney Garth reached the main entrance without being stopped *en route*.

The side path which led direct to the ladies' lawn from the main drive branched off about half-way between the house and the lodge gates, and as Charlotte drew near the narrow opening in the box hedge she was startled by seeing a man spring suddenly out of the shadow just in front of her. The next moment she was genuinely frightened, for he strode toward her and said, in a voice that was savage for all its careful avoidance of any noise:

"By God! madam, you have come just in the very nick of time, for I was going straight up to the house this minute!"

"What do you mean?" gasped Charlotte, pressing close up against the high yew hedge, in downright terror.

But at the first sound of her voice the approaching man stopped dead, and waited at a yard's distance from her.

"It is Lady Mirfield," he said, with a sudden moderation of tone.

"Yes, it is Lady Mirfield," she answered. "And I think you are the man who claimed to have been steward on Lord Mirfield's yacht. What are you doing again here?"

"I'll tell you that presently," he returned, "if you will first be kind enough to tell me where your sister-in-law is at this present moment, and what she is doing?"

"What do you mean by your questions?" she asked, impressed by something she could not fathom in the man's manner. "What have Mrs. Mirfield's doings to do with you?"

"I'll tell you that also, presently," he said again. "But I want to know, first, if there is any good reason for her breaking her appointment with me to-night. Is she ill?"

"No."

"Is she in the house?"

"Yes."

"And has no intention of coming out?"

"She left me five minutes ago to dress for dinner."

He swore a horrible oath under his breath.

"By Him who made us!" he said, "I'll teach the little concubine to put her tongue in her cheek at me."

At the first profane word Charlotte half turned toward the way she had come.

"No, no, my lady," he muttered, moving quickly forward so as to put himself between her and the house, "don't be in such a hurry, please. Since the young person who calls herself Mrs. Arthur Mirfield is too great a lady to keep an appointment with a man of my sort—an honest man, for all his misfortunes, mind you—I'll ask you to kindly be deputy for her, and listen to me for five minutes or so. Maybe, though, she sent you out here on purpose to hear what I've got to tell you? Perhaps things have turned out too much for her, and she's thrown up the sponge."

"Will you let me pass?" demanded Charlotte, measuring the distance between him and herself as well as the obscurity would allow of, and wondering whether she could get past him with a rush. "Will you let me pass, or am I to scream for help?"

"Neither the one nor the other," he said. "You'll listen willingly enough when I've asked you a simple question." He drew a step nearer, as if anxious to insure her hearing every word of his next sentence. "Did you ever hear anything about the lady companion as Lord Mirfield had with him on board his yacht for more'n three years before his death?"

Utter silence. The chimes of Cramlingford church striking the quarter after six break across the Sunday stillness, and he goes on again. He would like to see her face, but that is impossible, and he has to continue without being able to judge how she is likely to take his disclosures.

“And did you never hear of the little boy that was born at an out-of-the-way little village, not far from New Quay, on the Cornish coast? Until that time when I saw you here before—the time that you gave me that ten-pound note—I was always under the impression that the lady on board the yacht was Lord Mirfield’s wife. I thought the marriage was a secret one, and that his lordship was desperately afraid of his father finding out about it, but I certainly did believe that the woman was his wife, until I came here six weeks ago and saw the real Lady Mirfield.”

Still Charlotte says nothing. What, indeed, is there for her to say? A terrible, ghastly suspicion is creeping into her mind—a suspicion so agonizing in its possibilities of foulest treachery, that she feels as if her very heart were being plucked out of her body by the roots. Why has this man jumped in this abrupt fashion from his abuse of Molly to these reminiscences of Lionel’s yachting life? It is a question that she keeps on asking of herself over and over again, and it is a question to which, with all her innate bravery, she does not dare seek the answer. It is there, in her mind, but she has not the courage to face it.

“I dare say you know what I am coming to by now,” the man’s drink-sodden voice goes on. “You remember that I told you before that, when I saw you and your sister-in-law walking together in the village, and I was told you were Lady and Mrs. Mirfield, I concluded that the little one with the brown hair was the eldest son’s widow and you were the other’s. You see, now, how I came to make the mistake, don’t you? The likeness between the present so-called Honorable Mrs. Arthur Mirfield, and the woman who passed as Lord Mirfield’s wife among the crew of the yacht is so astonishing that I shouldn’t have the faintest hesitation in going into any court of law in the land and swearing that, to the best of my knowledge, they was one and the same person.”

And this is the woman Charlotte has taken to her heart of hearts; this is the woman she has admitted to her soul’s holiest of holies, who has been in very deed as her other self ever since those earliest days of her bereavement!

In these first moments of the crushing blow, it does not occur to her to wonder how this woman has been able to

maintain her ghastly imposture all this time, any more than it occurs to her that the man's story may be a fabrication from beginning to end. She is too stunned, too overwhelmed by the horror that has fallen upon her, to do more than grasp the awful fact itself. Molly, her brave little comforter, her bright, happy little companion, her sweet little sympathizer, is nothing but a lying, cheating, swindling impostor, who has wronged her in just that one way which a woman finds the hardest of all to forgive!

Truly this pit of horrors that she has stumbled into un-awares is a ghastly and gruesome place to find herself in.

In her misery she begins to picture an idyllic life on board that beautiful yacht, a life which in actual fact never existed at all—as poor little patient, forbearing Molly could have informed her—and these imaginings so absorb her thoughts that she almost screams when she is brought back to the present by a direct question from her companion.

“And now I’ve told you, what do you mean to do about it?” he asks.

“God knows!” she moans, with a dry sob of agony; “God alone knows!”

“It’s quite in your hands up to now, you see, my lady,” continues the crafty scoundrel, a little dashed by her quiet way of taking it—he had rather expected either hysterics or denunciation; this silent suffering is a thing he wots not of. He had reckoned on playing on her feelings, but if she does not feel it much, how can he expect to make a good bargain for his silence—“in your hands and mine, and—and that one other person’s, and if your fancy is to keep the whole thing quiet, and get rid of the—the other person, without taking the whole world into your confidence, you have only to say so and the thing is done. And, when you come to think of it, it wouldn’t be a pleasant thing, would it now, to know that everybody’s tongue was wagging over the——”

“Oh, hush!” she cried quickly, “hush!” and added instantly, as the sound of wheels was heard beyond the bend in the drive, “Hark! there is something coming! Stand up close under the hedge; I don’t want to be seen.”

He did as she bid him, drawing well back out of the way

of the advancing dog-cart, which dashed past them and on toward the house.

It was Abney. Charlotte heard his voice in conversation with the groom, and at once she formed the purpose of laying the whole thing before him, and leaving the management in his hands.

"You must go now," she said. "I cannot tell yet what I shall do about what you have told me. It has come upon me so suddenly that I can't make up my mind what is the best thing to do. You must go away, and hold your tongue until you hear from me. I will send you a line of some kind in the morning, to the inn, but you must promise me that, in the mean time, you will not say a word to a human being of what you have told me to-night."

"I'll promise that willing enough," he answered. "It's not likely I'd go to spoil my own market. The better the secret is kept the more valuable my silence is. I'll keep quiet enough, never you fear. My name is Maxon, my lady, Henry Maxon, and I'll leave word with the landlord that any letters that come are to be brought to me without a minute's delay, and so make sure of attending to your wishes as early as possible."

She was evidently unconscious of the change in his manner. She had as little thought to spare for his cringing servility as she had had for his paltry bullying.

"I will be sure to send to you in the morning," she said, and moved on toward the house, leaving him bowing and murmuring obsequious "Good-nights" in the middle of the drive.

He was so very servile because he was already beginning to doubt the wisdom of his own conduct. In the first furious gust of rage against Mrs. Mirfield, when he found she did not mean to keep her appointment with him, he had gone a little farther than prudence dictated. If he had been wise he would only have whetted Lady Mirfield's curiosity in this first interview, and made his own terms for the full disclosure. As things stood now, his only chance of making money lay in her desire to keep the thing quiet. If she decided to let things take their own course he would find himself out in the cold with a vengeance. He was thoroughly out of temper with everybody and everything

by the time he got back to the inn, and ready to quarrel with his own shadow.

As he came along the high street of the village he saw Mr. Redhead standing in the open doorway of the inn, apparently watching for him; and to his easily alarmed ear there was something rather disquieting in the "Here he is!" with which the landlord greeted his appearance.

For a moment he thought it might serve his purpose better to turn short round and go back the way he had just come, and cut across the dark, lonely park to the railway station at little Croxmore, and go straight back to Leeds that night. But the next instant he involuntarily altered his mind, for a short, thick-set man shot out of the inn door from behind Mr. Redhead, and faced him on the pathway of the village street; and for all his iron-gray hair, there was an air of bustle and decision about the small man's movements which seemed to suggest a considerable amount of muscular power.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. What's-your-name," said this energetic person, stopping short in front of him. "I am delighted to meet you! I've been wanting to make your acquaintance this long time past. Our mutual friend here, Mr. Redhead, has spoken so highly of you, that it has been a matter of great regret to me not to meet you before. How are you? I hope you have had a pleasant walk."

Mr. Maxon was too much taken aback by the assurance of this greeting to do anything but stand stock-still and look at his new self-made acquaintance.

"Got the advantage of you, haven't I?" said Clem, putting his hands in his pockets and looking very straight at him. "I haven't the pleasure of knowing your name, but I know something a good deal more to the purpose—I know the business you are down here on, for I happen to be down on the same business myself."

"Do you, though?" replied the other, with a would-be touch of irony.

"Yes, I do, though," echoed Clem, with perfect temper; "and if it hadn't been for a downright piece of bad-luck, by which I lost last night's mail, you and I might have worked the thing together. Have you driven a good bargain for yourself with the little lady?"

Without a word Maxon turned sharp round on his heel and walked back the way he had come till they reached a deserted part of the village, beyond earshot from the inn door, where Redhead was still standing.

"Now, then, say out what you mean," he said.

"I mean," replied Borthwicke, "I mean Mrs.—Arthur Mirfield."

The pause before the Christian name was cleverly managed—just long enough for his companion to understand if the shot was correct, and not long enough to arouse his suspicions unless they were already pointed in that direction. For Clem had not succeeded in thoroughly quelling the impulse of pity which had seized upon him at the discovery of Molly's real identity, and he was not actually enjoying the notion of hauling her down from the position in which she had established herself. But, his compassion notwithstanding, it was more than he was capable of to stand aside and let another man bleed his nephew's estate of untold sums as hush-money. If the little woman was to be ousted, he felt it was his duty, as George's legal representative, to take a part in the process.

"I mean," he said, "I mean Mrs.—Arthur Mirfield."

And when the other repeated the little sentence—meaning pause included—"Just so; *I* mean Mrs.—Arthur Mirfield," Clem knew he had not been mistaken, and resumed the conversation in a less cautious key.

"I guessed from what Redhead said that you had an appointment to keep with some one to-night. Was it with her, and what understanding have you come to?"

"Well, blow me if you ain't a cool hand," returned Maxon, "to expect me to take you into my confidence in that fashion."

"Oh, well, you can do as you like about speaking," said Borthwicke. "I only wanted to know how far you had gone, don't you see you know, because I may as well tell you at once that, if your game is money, you won't get a brass penny."

"Who'll prevent me?"

"I shall."

"And who the devil are you?"

"The nearest of kin to the next lawfully begotten—*lawfully begotten*—heir."

"If you mean Lady Mirfield's child," said Maxon, after a slight pause, "I think you're out in your reckoning. She's inclined to hold her tongue for the sake of her dead husband."

"So you've got at her already, have you!" exclaimed Clem. "Well, I'm sorry, for the other poor little woman's sake; at the same time you've removed my last scruple, and left me free to go ahead as fast as I like. No, Mr. Thingamy, I don't mean Lady Mirfield's child. Lady Mirfield's child being a girl, and the Netley title descending only through heirs-male, it passes over her head to Lord Netley's nephew, who happens to be my nephew also; and it is in his interest, he being at present out of England, that I mean to take this matter up, and prevent you from fingering a farthing of hush-money out of the Netley estate. If you had not been in such a blessed hurry to tell your story to the very last person in the world who ought to have known it, I might have held back even now; but the mischief is done, and my silence won't mend matters a bit, and so, don't you see you know, your poor bit of spite comes back on your own head."

"It was her own fault," muttered the other, savagely sullen under his disappointment. "Why didn't she keep her appointment and meet me? She knew I wasn't the sort of man to stand a snub like that; she's seen me often enough in a temper on board the boat."

"Oh, a member of the yacht's crew, were you?" said Clem. "I begin to understand."

"I was steward and caterer the whole time Lord Netley had the yacht."

"Ah! Well, I'm sorry for you, Mr. Steward, for your little game is bowled out this time and no mistake. Good-night! The next time you know a woman's secret don't let your nasty spite spoil your market."

"Stop a bit," said Maxon, as he moved away; "are you going straight on with this thing to-night?"

"Yes, my beauty, as straight on as I can. I'm going to beg a bit of dinner from my sister—the mother of my

nephew—and afterward I'm going to carry her straight on up to the house, and have the whole thing out *in camera* to-night, so that the poor little woman may have time to clear out of the way in the morning before the family lawyer hears my story, and comes down on her like a hundred of bricks."

"Well, I think I should like to be present at that little family meeting, if you've no objection?"

"Not the least in the world," returned Clem, "so long as you don't ask me to stand sponsor for your presence."

"Just now you spoke about our working the thing together," said Maxon insinuatingly.

"Quite so; but that was before I knew you had betrayed the little woman into the hands of the wife. You've done all the harm you possibly can, and I wish you joy of your brew. If you think I'm going to claim part or parcel in that business you're confoundedly mistaken. And as for taking you up to the house to-night under the shadow of my wing, why, I'll see you at blazes first, don't you see you know!"

With which elegant peroration Mr. Borthwicke took his departure, leaving the ex-steward, an embodiment of defeated rage, in the middle of the silent street. And he was still standing there when Clem looked back from Mrs. Mirfield's garden gate, obviously at a loss as to what his next step should be.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHARLOTTE'S RIGHTEOUS RESENTMENT.

WHEN Charlotte got back to the house, aflame from head to foot with righteous resentment against the woman who had wronged her wifhood first and violated the sanctity of her home and heart afterward, quivering from the terrible ordeal she had gone through, burning with a just sense of her great wrongs, and wounded to the very core of her being by the thought that it was Molly—the one woman in all the world for whom she had ever felt a real tender affection—who had perpetrated this basest of treach-

eries against her; when she entered the hall, shaking so much with the weight and burden of her manifold emotions that she could hardly walk steadily, the first person her glance fell upon, warming her dainty feet in front of the leaping log flames, and looking even sweeter and more flower-like than ever, was Molly herself.

Charlotte's feelings, as a rule, were all so honest and outspoken that her first impulse was to walk straight up to the little creature and lay her accusation before her; and she would have done it but for a sudden deadly qualm that came upon her at the thought of the white, wild, guilty fright that would leap into the other's face as she listened.

It is one of the inevitable shortcomings of a generous temperament like Charlotte's that it feels everything in extremes, and just as she had loved Molly with all her heart, so did she now shrink from her with an aversion which left no room for any other feeling—half measures either for good or evil were impossibilities to her.

"You have been out?" said Molly in considerable surprise, turning at the sound of her heels on the polished floor. "Abney wondered a little at your not being here. He has gone to his room."

Charlotte answered never a word. She would have hated herself if she had spoken pleasantly while she was feeling so bitter, and she wanted to take Abney's advice on the matter before bringing things to a crisis.

As she crossed the hall toward the foot of the staircase her silence made Molly turn to look at her more closely, and as their eyes met the little woman took her foot off the fender-rail, and went over toward her.

"What has happened, Lotte?" she asked. "My dear, what are you looking at me like that for? Oh, Lotte!" she broke off, with a terrified catch in her breath, as a sudden thought darted into her mind, "I—I think I know—what it is. Somebody—has been speaking to you about me."

Lady Mirfield said nothing, but as she turned to look at Molly such an expression came into her eyes—an expression in which scorn and misery fought one another for the upper hand—that Molly shrank back against the baluster with a heartbroken little cry.

"Oh, Lotte!" she said. "Oh, Lotte, my dear, my dear!"

It seemed as if that was all she could say just then; but, when Lady Mirfield made as if to speak, her words came back to her.

"No," she cried, under her breath, with a quick little gesture for silence, "no, don't say what is in your heart just now, I beg of you! Wait until you have heard both sides of the question before you pass judgment on me. I admit I have done you a great wrong in creeping into your home under false pretences, but it seemed to me at the time that I did you a less wrong that way than the other. There are extenuating circumstances, Charlotte, as I think you will be the first to admit when you have heard the story all through."

"Extenuating circumstances!" echoed Charlotte, in a voice that rang and quivered with the intolerable burden of her wrongs—a voice which Molly could not recognize at all with that thrill of bitterness in it, and at which she shrank back another step or two, with such suffering in her eyes that Charlotte must have pitied her if she could have spared thought for anything but her own misery. "Extenuating circumstances!" she said again in that keen, piercing voice. "All our married life you stood between my husband and me, and when he is dead you come here, into the home of the wife you have cheated once, and worm yourself into her affections till you make her love you too; and then, when at last your infamy is discovered, you begin to babble about extenuating circumstances. As if anything in the world could extenuate such conduct!"

She threw up her hands with an action which expressed her utter inability to understand such depths of treachery, and turned and went on up the stairs, leaving Molly a statue of despair at the foot.

And yet after all this, at the sound of the gong she came down, quiet and self-possessed, to take her place at the dinner-table. Perhaps she half expected that Molly would absent herself after what had taken place, but she made no sign when she found her already in the dining-room; and Abney, coming in a moment behind her, saw nothing very unusual in her manner when he went round to shake hands with her before taking his own seat.

The conversation during dinner was chiefly of the details of Tuesday's ceremonial; but dry as the subject was, and conventional as all dinner-table talk of necessity is, the knowledge gradually came home to Abney during the course of the meal that there was an indescribable chill in the social atmosphere. Gayety was not to be expected, of course, just now; but he felt that this fact in itself did not account for the air of constraint which he felt rather than saw in the manner of the two ladies.

He waited with what patience he could until the departure of the servants gave him a chance to speak out.

"If I did not know that it was almost impossible," he began, as soon as the door had closed gently behind the butler's majestic figure, "I should fancy that you two best of friends had quarrelled while I have been away."

He paused, and Molly looked across at Charlotte as if expecting her to speak, and then, seeing she meant to keep silent, spoke herself.

"Not quarrelled, Abney," she said gently. "You know too much of my affection for Lady——" she checked herself in the middle of the formal address and substituted the Christian name—"my affection for Charlotte, to think any misunderstanding between us could ever develop into a quarrel."

"Well, that is just what I said," he answered, with a smile at her anxious face, "and that is just what makes me so curious to know what is wrong between you."

Molly hesitated still, and glanced again at Lotte's beautiful, indignant face.

"I wish you would tell Abney," she said.

"No," answered Charlotte, "I can't trust myself. Tell him yourself, and make the most of your extenuating circumstances."

At the concentrated bitterness of the reply Abney glanced quickly from one to the other.

"Is it anything serious?" he asked. "Has the truth come out, Molly?"

"Some of it," she answered.

"And Charlotte thinks she has cause of complaint against you?"

"She does not know all, Abney."

"Then she must know at once. Why did you not tell her? How did she find out?"

"I think she must have seen the man who was steward on board the yacht. He has been here again during your absence. I have seen him. I was to have met him again to-night, but when I heard you were coming home I left it for you to arrange. Charlotte was out before dinner, and I think she must have seen him, because when she came in she accused me of——"

"What?" asked Abney, as she paused.

"Of stealing her husband's love from her."

"Ah!" He got up from the table and pushed his chair back in a way betokening sudden resolution. "Shall we go up to your snuggery, Molly, or shall we go to my study? This thing has got to be thoroughly cleared up at last, little friend, and we had better go somewhere where we are sure of not being interrupted for an hour."

"Come to my room," she said. "Will you come there, Charlotte, or would you rather go to Abney's?"

Charlotte signified she did not mind which, and rose, looking as if she were not quite sure if she was awake or dreaming. Abney had not shown the least indignation or even astonishment at Molly's allusions. What did it mean? Something more than she knew of yet—that much was certain.

As Abney opened the door for them to leave the room the house-bell clanged out on the stillness of the night.

"What can that be at this time of night?" he said, pushing the door to again and listening to the servant's footsteps passing down the hall.

"It is he—Maxon—the man I spoke of!" cried Molly, as a voice was heard inquiring for Lady Mirfield.

"Oh, is it?" said Abney, with a grim tightening of his lips. "Well, I think I'll interview that gentleman myself," and he went out, leaving the two women listening inside the door.

By the time he reached the outer hall there was another arrival; just inside the door, looking frightened and uncomfortable, stood Mrs. George Mirfield, accompanied by a small man, with iron-gray hair, whom Abney did not remember seeing before. This short gentleman was doing

all the talking, and evidently browbeating the tall, shabby, sallow-faced man in a pilot coat, whom Abney recognized as the ex-steward he had paid off with the rest of the yacht's crew at Lord Mirfield's death.

"So you have had the impertinence to intrude yourself on our family gathering after all," the small man was saying. "Did you wait outside the door until you saw us coming? I'm not going to have you standing by while I make my statement and claim, don't you see you know, so I don't see what good you've done by stealing a march upon me. Who is at the head of affairs here just now?" he asked, turning to the astonished footman, who was holding the door open with an air of protest.

"Mr. Garth has returned from London this evening, sir," the man answered, looking over the questioner's head at Mrs. Mirfield, with a glance which seemed to ask if she was responsible for the appearance of this loud-voiced, bumptious little person. "If you have called upon business I dare say he will see you. The ladies are not receiving anybody just now."

Garth went quietly forward toward Mrs. Mirfield, wondering who the unknown might be.

"Charlotte is still in the dining-room," he said; "will you go to her? Did you want to see me, sir?"

"Well, I ain't particular," said Clem, giving his hat a sideway tip and looking the new arrival over critically. "I suppose you are Mr. Garth?"

Abney bowed.

"Well, then, I've got something to say concerning the state of things here, and since it seems that you are the person left in charge I may as well say it to you."

"I hardly understand why a stranger should choose such an extraordinary time to——"

"It is my brother, Mr. Garth," put in Mrs. Mirfield, trying not to show how far from proud she was of the relationship; "Mr. Borthwicke, he has come up here to-night to look after my son's interests. I think it will be better for all parties if we go somewhere where we can have our talk out in quietness."

"Assuredly," returned Abney smoothly. "And this other gentleman, Mr. Borthwicke, is he to come too? Has

he also something to say concerning the state of affairs here?"

"In any case I'll come too, if you please, sir," said Maxon, with a look which was meant to be alarming. "I've had interviews already with Lady Mirfield and Mrs. Mirfield on the subject, and I know they would prefer not to have me shut out of this one."

Abney signified his submission to this arrangement, and led the way back to the dining-room. If he could but have had ten minutes to prepare Charlotte for what was coming, he would have felt comparatively comfortable.

The ladies had gone back to their seats at the round dining-table when the other people came into the room; but Charlotte rose to shake hands with Mrs. Mirfield, and Molly rose and pushed her chair up nearer Charlotte's for the elder lady; an attention which she accepted as she would have accepted it from the footman—without acknowledgment of any kind.

Garth saw it, and for a moment there came a look into his usually grave face which was almost like an anticipation of triumph; but, whatever the look meant, it soon gave place to his former air of expectant anxiety.

Clem's eyes were busy too, and saw everything, and in the midst of all his excitement he felt that he would have liked to draw the chair from under his amiable sister and send her sprawling on the carpet; but he contented himself with fetching Molly another chair instead.

Perhaps it was this trifling act of arrogance on his relative's part which led him to open his denunciation with an apology.

"I want you to understand, first of all," he said, addressing his remark pointedly to the pale, trembling little woman at his side, "that if it hadn't been for this other chap here I wouldn't have moved in this matter at all; I would have left it, as George wished it to be left, until he came home from India to manage affairs his own way. But when I knew this man had got at Lady Mirfield, and told her everything, and was trying to get hush-money out of her, where was the use of my holding my tongue any longer, don't you see, you know?"

"No," Molly answered, with a quick glance across at

Charlotte's white, rigid face, "no, I suppose there is no possibility of any further concealment; the whole miserable truth will have to come out now. I am only glad it did not happen before the poor old man upstairs went to his rest."

Mrs. George Mirfield snorted impatiently and loosened her bonnet strings, almost as if Molly's audacity in alluding to the dead nobleman had made her faint with indignation.

"Yes, I dare say it's as well the earl knew nothing at all about it," Clem went on, astonished to find how his repugnance for the task before him increased as he drew nearer to it. "As it is, there's not much harm done anywhere. My nephew isn't the man to begrudge you the little you and the boy have cost the estate, and I shouldn't be surprised if he settled something on the child; for blood's thicker than water, after all, you know, Mr. Garth, and the youngster is no ways to blame for the misfortune of his birth."

"I think you are settling things a little prematurely," Abney answered, with his habitual quietness rather accentuated. "Wouldn't it be as well to tell us why Mrs. Mirfield and her boy are to resign their present position under the late Lord Netley's will before you begin suggesting new arrangements?"

Clem looked absolutely embarrassed.

"Is there any need at all for us to go into unpleasant details?" he asked. "We all know the exact state of the case. What occasion is there to distress the lady most concerned by dragging her misfortunes into the discussion?"

"Yes," said Charlotte, breaking in for the first time, "I agree with you there. Let us drop the discussion of the past, if you please, Abney, and try to make the best arrangements we can for keeping this most ghastly scandal out of everybody's mouth in the future."

"And condemn our criminal unheard?" asked Abney, with a queer little smile at Molly.

"Well," said Clem, looking rather roused at the other's persistency, "if it comes to that, don't you think that, for your own sake, Mr. Garth, it is a case of 'the least said the soonest mended'?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Garth, flashing round quickly on the speaker, "that is the sort of thing I have been waiting for. I could not understand why, if you knew as much as you pretended, you did not attack me with an accusation of conspiracy and fraud. The honest truth of this matter is that whatever wrong and wickedness there is in it I am responsible for. It was in obedience to my persuasion that Mrs. Arthur, as she has been called here, consented to the course of double-dealing and deceit which is to end with this meeting. Now, Mr. Borthwicke, I am not one of those meek people who care about being condemned unheard, and since you have hinted an accusation against me, I shall make the best case possible for myself. It seemed to me at the time that I was justified in what I did; but I was harassed and torn half-a-dozen different ways by my feelings, and my duties to the different people I was mixed up with, and I have sometimes since wished that I had decided differently. However, it is useless reverting to that now. Will you state in round terms what your accusation against me is, and give me a chance of defending myself?"

Charlotte's face during this was a study. When Abney ranged himself openly on the side of the woman who had done her this bitter wrong it seemed to her that nothing could ever astonish her again. The very world—her world, that is—was shaken to its foundations.

"I'm glad you've put it that way," Clem said. "You look better able to defend yourself than the other party; and since you will have it, here it is. My charge against you is that you did, on the day following Lord Mirfield's death, induce this lady here, the mother of his child, to accompany you to his father's home in the place of and under the title and style of Mrs. Arthur Mirfield, that person being left behind in London under another name. I also accuse you of conspiring to pass this lady's child off upon Lord Netley as Arthur Mirfield's lawfully begotten son, that son having in reality died at Leuville, where he lies buried near his father; and, further, I accuse you of conspiring to maintain the fraud, during the eighteen months it has been carried on, by every means in your power."

"Right on every count!" answered Garth, and though his words came as deliberately, and the modulations of his fine voice rose and fell as evenly as ever, Molly and Charlotte knew by the flexibility of his lips, and the unusual rapidity of his glance, as it travelled from face to face, that he was considerably stirred by what was taking place. "Right on every count, Mr. Borthwicke! I plead guilty to the whole indictment; but I also plead justification, and as everybody here has heard the accusation, I think they should hear the justification too. Will you find yourself a chair, Mr. Maxon? It may take me some minutes to make myself understood." He waited a moment, as if he found it difficult to know where to begin, and then turned to Borthwicke. "It would have puzzled me to imagine how you got at the secret of the substitution, but for a chance meeting I had with Mrs. Philpott in town yesterday afternoon. She told me how you had waylaid her, and wrung the truth from her, so you see this discovery has not come upon me quite unawares. If I could have contrived a few minutes' private conversation with Lady Mirfield before your arrival, the whole of the mischief would have been taken out of this combined attack. As it is—well, I am afraid it will be a terrible ordeal for her, and it would be a very great relief to me if she would waive her right to hear the truth until a little later."

"Yes," said Molly, rising with sudden eagerness, "yes, Charlotte, let us go away now, dear, and Abney will tell you everything when——"

"I will hear it now, if you please," she interposed, silencing Molly with a slight but imperious movement of her hand. "It seems that everybody has been making a play-thing of me, for their own purposes, ever since the death of my husband. I don't choose to be hoodwinked any longer. I will hear the whole truth at once, if you please."

Molly sat down again, with a pitiful little sigh, and Garth went on with what he had to say, looking at Charlotte as little as he could, though his eyes would wander in her direction as often as he lost the hold on his self-restraint.

"I need not go into that part of the story affecting Arthur Mirfield's widow and child, beyond saying that, when

I found out the boy was dead and the widow was in reality no widow at all, my chief worry was on account of the disappointment in store for Lord Netley. I knew better than anybody what the hope of Arthur's son had been to him. Then there came the further crushing blow, the moment I reached London, of Lord Mirfield's fatal accident. He was to die, too, it seemed, without leaving an heir behind him.

"Well, you all know how, the moment I had crossed from France, I went straight to his death-bed; but only one among you knows of the confession he made to me as he lay dying. He confessed to me, Lady Mirfield, that he had wronged an innocent woman in a most dastardly fashion; that he had gone through the form of marriage with her when he was already a married man, and that she firmly believed herself to be his wife; and he made me promise that, with heart and brain, I would struggle to shield this unfortunate woman from the shame he had brought on her and her child."

"He—married—her!" whispered Charlotte, with a half breath between each word, as if the thought was strangling her. "He—married—her! Oh, if you had but told me!"

"Told you?" continued Garth. "What was the use of adding to your grief at such a time? And Lord Netley—why add to the shock of the double blow which had already fallen upon him, by telling him that his eldest son was a cowardly villain? Well, I gave Lord Mirfield the promise he asked of me, and in accordance with his instructions I went to meet the lady and her child, who arrived from Plymouth at noon on the day of his death. And then, Lady Mirfield, when this lady began to talk to me, I found out the full significance of the promise I had given to the dead. All this time I had been laboring under the mistaken notion that this other lady was the wronged creature, whom I was to shield from the consequences of Mirfield's infamy; but she soon set me right on that point. She had her dressing-case brought into the hotel, and unlocked it, and showed me her marriage certificate; and the date it bore was a clear two months earlier than your marriage with Mirfield. You were the injured woman for whom Mirfield had implored my good services; this other lady was the wife!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A THUNDERING BRICK.

CHARLOTTE gave a cry and sprang upright, with her two hands pressed palms downward on the table in front of her; and the dead whiteness of the cloth under her extended fingers was not more void of color than her stricken face.

Molly rose with her, and ran round the table, and threw herself on her knees by her side, and put an arm round her waist, and laid her lips warmly and pitifully on those wide-stretched strained fingers, and let her tears flow unrestrainedly over them, as she murmured brokenly an entreaty for pardon.

Every one else in the room had given some sign of astonishment as the truth burst in on their understandings, but after that first exclamation they forgot their own feelings in presence of those others, so much stronger than theirs.

"I can't grasp it!" muttered Charlotte, with her dazed eyes searching Garth's grieved face in a kind of mental stupefaction. "Say it again, Abney! I don't seem to—understand."

"Molly has been the wife all the time," he repeated. "It was you that Mirfield was alluding to when he asked me to stand by the woman he had wronged; but he mentioned no name, and I committed the mistake naturally enough of thinking he was speaking of the lady I had just heard of for the first time."

"What a position," she said, speaking as people speak in their sleep, without expression or emphasis of any kind; and it was strange how this absence of all expression in her voice and manner impressed the fact of her suffering upon her hearers, as perhaps no outward display of distress would have done; "what an intolerable position! To think that all these years I have been nothing but a sham, a person utterly without name or standing, occupying my place here as Lord Netley's daughter-in-law only by the forbearance of others! And my child, too, who and what is she?

How shall I ever live and bear it? The shame and the pain of it press on me like death."

"There is no shame," cried Garth, striking the table sharply with his hand, as if he would drive the idea home with a blow, "for you, Charlotte! No shame nor blame of the very faintest kind. If the whole world knew all there is to know of these most unhappy events, it would feel nothing but the most respectful sympathy for the position you have been placed in. As for Daisy—— Is it worth while going into that? All memory of this miserable business will have passed away long before she is old enough to understand such things. Miss Garth is not an imposing name, but it will do as well as any other; she will adopt the name when you do, and there is an end of the difficulty as far as Daisy is concerned. Let us try to be practical over this business. Instead of thinking how terrible it is, let us try to remember how much more terrible it might have been. Suppose this discovery had been made during Lord Netley's life? Think what it would have been to him to know of his son's dishonor! Don't you think we ought to be very grateful that he was spared that last blow? And it has needed some resolution, I assure you! Things have not always been quite *couleur de rose* for that little lady at your side, who is behaving as if she thought she had need of your forgiveness for having treated you with the most extraordinary forbearance one woman ever showed to another. She has had a very great deal to put up with one way and the other; more than we either of us foresaw when we arranged that she should pose here as Arthur's widow, but she never flinched; she bore it all for your sake and the sake of the old man who is gone."

Charlotte's white face lost some of its ghastly rigidity as she listened, and her eyes softened. She did not move her hand away from Molly's kisses, but she lifted the other and stroked the small brown head once or twice, and then pressed it up close, quite close, against her heart, and held it there, looking still across the table at Garth with a new wonderment deepening all over her.

"Such generosity!" she said. "When in this world before did ever woman have two such friends? Such self-

abnegation! And to think how I spoke to her just now—before dinner, in the hall; the shame of it! And she never answered me—as she might—and she has stood aside all this time, and left me the first place—I who had no shred of right—and she has put up with so much—how could she, Abney?”

“I suppose,” said Abney, with a warm smile, “I suppose it is because she is what schoolboys would call a thundering brick; because, having once taken up her position, she meant to fight it out to the last. I think her colors were nailed to the mast before she went into action. And then she had an old debt to pay to you, Charlotte, and she was so proud and glad to have this chance of paying it.”

“A debt? To me?”

“She will tell you all that by and by, perhaps. It is nothing that will interest these ladies and gentlemen.”

For the first time Charlotte moved her glance from her lover’s face and remembered the presence of the others. A faint pink flashed into her white cheeks as she met Borthwicke’s look of interest.

“Shall we go, Abney?” she said. “It would have been better if I had done as you asked me—waited for this disclosure in private. I brought it on myself by my stiff-neckedness. The pride that went before a fall,” she added, with a faint smile. “Come, Molly!”

“I should like to say,” observed Clem, getting on to his feet suddenly, “that there is no fall to Lady Mirfield’s pride as far as I am concerned. When I leave this room the thing is done with. I’m not quite such a cur as to spoil a piece of work like this of Lady Molly’s, for the sake of a little foolish chatter. And Mr. Steward, here, can’t do better than promise to hold his tongue too.”

Maxon did not answer instantly, looking round the circle of faces with a furtive significance which there was no mistaking.

“It is a free country,” he said sullenly. “A man can’t be punished for speaking the simple truth.”

And then all in an instant Molly’s warrior blood was up, and she leaned across the table toward him.

“No,” she answered, “but he can be punished for appropriating the contents of his master’s plate-basket, and

you will understand, Maxon, that the first whisper that reaches us of public gossip being busy with this lady's name I shall take as a signal to communicate with the police authorities, concerning a little transaction of that kind of which nobody but you and I know anything at present. And you need not look at me in that defiant manner, my good soul," she added, nodding her pretty head warningly at him, "for it happens, fortunately enough, that I know the name and address of the man at Plymouth to whom you took the silver to sell, and his evidence, or the evidence of his shopman, will always be forthcoming at a few hours' notice. So take my advice and be obliging, and hold your tongue when you are requested to."

"I'm not aware as I ever said I was goin' to do different," said the ill-conditioned brute, making a virtue of necessity, and taking up a new position as soon as the old one grew untenable. "If it'll be any satisfaction to you to hear me take an oath on the subject, I'll say, may God str——"

"That's enough!" struck in Garth. "Mrs. Mirfield has given you fair warning, see that you take it; for mind you, Maxon, she has a habit of acting up to her promises. Can you find your way out, or shall I ring?"

He rose and shambled from the room, looking about as thoroughly beaten as a man can look, and it is due to his sense of self-interest to say that, as far as could be judged by results, he kept his promise of silence to the letter.

"I suppose you are satisfied to take my word about this business, Mr. Borthwicke?" said Garth. "If you would like to satisfy yourself by a glance at the certificates, I will give you the dates and names now—Lionel Mirfield and Margaret Evans, January the second——"

"Evans!" cried Charlotte, turning round from the position she had taken up on the hearth-rug, and betraying the fact that she and Molly were "laying themselves down" to a good cry; "Evans? Molly! I think I am beginning to understand! Are you the daughter of that Mr. Evans who broke his arm on Bryn-mawr—the man Rhino and I watched by all through that big snow-storm? Are you the pretty child who came to see me with her mother the day afterward, and made some impassioned speech about

paying me with her life for what I had done? Is that it, Molly? Have I found you out at last, dear girl?"

And Molly making no denial, Charlotte put her arms round her, and they turned back to the fire again to have their cry out in peace.

If anybody had had the time or the inclination to give any attention to Mrs. George Mirfield during the last quarter of an hour, ever since Abney Garth's disclosure of the truth, they would have seen for themselves how excessively uncomfortable that good lady found herself among her present circumstances; and her discomfort seemed to culminate now when—the two men being busy with pencils and note-books verifying the hard facts of the two marriages, and the two ladies being busier still with their efforts to atone to one another for the suffering they had innocently caused one another—she found herself stranded, as it were, high and dry upon the rocks of her own spiteful malice, and realized the difficulty of scrambling down to the safe level of popular opinion again.

If her attacks upon Molly had been made purely and simply with the legitimate object of establishing George's claims on the estate, she would have found her present position easier to defend; but she knew, and she was thoroughly aware that everybody else knew, that, apart from her perfectly natural desire for her son's advancement, there had always been a strong leaven of personal animosity at work, in her attempts to bring the "little play actress" at The Fallow into open shame and humiliation.

And now, to discover that she was no play actress after all, and worse still, that in all her past there was nothing whatever against her; that, in fact, the more you knew about her the more blameless and lovable she appeared.

Yes, Mrs. George Mirfield was certainly very uncomfortable as she sat at the table, a little apart from the two men, with her mind full of the astonishing disclosures she had just listened to. So thoroughly *de trop* did she feel that three several times she took hold of her loosened bonnet-strings, with the intention of tying them up and taking her departure; but somehow the thought of stalking through the room without a word to any one dismayed her, and she dropped her hands on her lap again and sat on,

horribly conscious of being at a great disadvantage, and lacking the courage to set herself straight.

And it ended by Molly making the *amende* which should have come from the other side.

It was when Mr. Borthwicke rose to take his leave that the little woman first became aware of the exceedingly upright, constrained bearing of her old adversary, and with a quaint little exclamation, half amusement, half sympathy, she went round to her and held out her hand.

"Please let us be real good friends at last," she said. "You know everything there is to know about me now, I promise you; won't you try to think a little better of me, now you know that I was not the ignorant person who put the advertisement of Arthur Mirfield's marriage in the *Morning Post*, without naming either the church or the clergyman who performed the ceremony? Don't you remember how you sat in judgment upon me for the omission, and how abominably impertinent I was to you in return? You must try to make some little excuse for me. I have always been so terrified when anybody tried to dip into that marriage business, and I used to try to cover up my fright with bluster, don't you see? It was part of the price I had to pay for my deceit. You won't remember it against me now, will you?"

And Mrs. Mirfield graciously consented "not to remember it against her now," and shook hands with great affability, and allowed herself to be coaxed into forgetting her past offensive conduct; which, as Abney pointed out, was exceeding considerate of her toward her own interests, as to be at variance with the present head of the house would not at all fit in with her desire to be ranked as one of the family circle at The Fallow.

It was very late indeed that night before the lights were all out in Netley Fallow. Molly had much to tell, and Charlotte much to hear; but in all that long exchange of confidences it was noticeable that there was little or nothing relating to events which had happened during Lord Mirfield's lifetime. That period would always remain a closed book between them; it was proper and natural that it should be so; but there was no dearth of topics between them on that account.

"I don't know upon whom the blow fell more heavily," said Molly, as she sat on the rug in Charlotte's dressing-room between two and three in the morning, with her hair down about her; "upon Abney or me, when we discovered exactly how things stood. Of course all his sympathies were with you and Lord Netley, and, equally of course, all mine were for my boy and his rights. I should have come straight down here and made a clean breast of the whole terrible thing, if Abney had not happened to mention you by your maiden name, Lotte, and then——"

She paused a moment, and drew a big, deep breath, and when she began again, it seemed at first as if she had started another subject altogether.

"Do you remember my poor mother at all, Lotte? I don't suppose you do; you only saw her that once, the day after my father's accident, if you could call it seeing her, when you sat and talked for a quarter of an hour in a half-dark room."

But Charlotte did remember Mrs. Evans quite well, and she said so.

"Still, you could hardly judge the sort of woman she was from that short glimpse of her. She was the most simple and sincerely religious person I have ever known, Lotte. No matter what she was doing, or where she was, religion came as natural to her as the air she breathed. We got used to it at home, and never saw anything funny in it, because we all knew so well that every word of it came straight from her heart; but I have seen strangers quite at a loss when she pitchforked texts into the midst of the conversation, without a suspicion of their unsuitableness to the subject under discussion. Well, the gratitude this poor, quaint, simple-minded mother of mine felt toward you was a positive passion. From the day of my father's accident up to the time I left home, your name was always mentioned in her family prayers every evening, with an entreaty that Heaven would bless every step of your path through life; and so the feeling that we all owed you a something we could never hope to repay got to be an article of my religious creed, and abode with me always immovable. So now, perhaps, you can understand something of what I felt when Abney mentioned your

maiden name, and I discovered that the woman I was going to drag down from her place, in order to make room for myself, was the woman whose name had always held a place in my memory as the greatest benefactress of my life. How could I bring myself to do it? But again, how could I consent to sacrifice my boy's prospects in life? I put the question direct to Abney. For myself, I was content to stand aside and be a nonentity all my days; but how to reconcile this with my duty to my child?

"And then Abney had an inspiration. Lord Netley had sent him to bring home his grandson—Arthur's son; why should we not take Lionel's son home to him instead? And when I found my boy would not suffer, I jumped at the idea. Here was a way at last by which I could show that my gratitude was something more than mere words.

"So I came, Lotte, prepared from the first to revere and worship you from a distance, but you improved on my plan by taking me into your very heart at the first go off, and I worshipped and loved you all the better for the change.

"And from that day until this I never once regretted the decision I came to——"

"No, but you did to-day—you must!" said Lotte. "When I said those awful things to you in the hall——"

"No, I did not regret it even then: I knew you would know soon. My one regret has always been that Lionel and I ever met. He used to come down that time—you know—after my father's fall, to ask how he got on. Every day he came, and when mother was busy, I would see him——"

"Good heavens!" cried Charlotte, and stopped short. She was thinking how those daily visits of Mirfield's had originated. It was she herself who had laid upon him the duty of making daily inquiries concerning the progress of the man she had preserved from death, and this was what had come of it. In all that had happened there was nothing of the nature of a coincidence. One event had produced another in a natural sequence, and all the harm that had come about had resulted from the simplest chance in the world.

If she had allowed Lionel to return to Yorkshire with

her the day after his proposal, as he himself wished, those daily meetings with Mr. Evans' daughter would never have taken place, his impressionable fancy would never have been caught by her winsome face and impulsive little manners, and two women's lives would have gone with comparative smoothness. It was a weird, uncanny thought to dwell upon, that all this suffering and pain had resulted from such a mere whim as that desire of hers to travel home alone, so weird that she put it from her, and took herself to task for her own presumption, with a sudden recollection of the lines:

"There is a divinity above doth shape our ends,
Rough-hew them as we will."

Why should she dare to believe that her whole life had been influenced for evil by such an insignificant chance as that? Did God take no more interest in the creatures He created than such a belief would imply? She could not think it. It was all a part of the vast mystery of life, a mystery far beyond the grasp of her finite understanding, and she would not commit the common blunder of ignorance, that, because she could see no good in it, therefore it must be evil.

And so she kissed Molly as tenderly as ever when at last they separated for a few hours' rest; and if she had to confess, in the deepest recesses of her heart, that she was glad that they were not henceforth to pass their daily lives in one another's society, can she be blamed very heavily for it? Henceforth for her there would always be a faint flavor of bitterness mixed up with Molly's sweetness; she would never be able to quite forget that this self-same bitterness had lured her first love from his sworn allegiance to herself, that it had come between her and the accomplishment of her girlhood's dream. She might never let the memory influence her manner in the slightest degree, but it would always lurk in her mind, and its presence must inevitably dim the pleasure of her intercourse with the woman who had won the prize she had striven so hard for.

The only person in all the world who ever guessed at this feeling was Garth; and while recognizing its injustice,

he had the good sense not to attempt to conquer it; acknowledging to himself that Charlotte would have been more than human if she had not felt something of the kind, and leaving to time the task of dulling the pain from which the touch of jealousy sprang.

It was about a fortnight after Lord Netley's death that business took Mr. Borthwicke into the neighborhood of St. James', between eight and nine in the evening. The sight of The Dodos' club-house recalled Royston to his mind, and, acting on the impulse of the moment, he ran up the steps into the hall, and asked if that gentleman was in. A sudden desire had come to him to enlighten Molly's champion as to the *bona-fides* of the lady whose battle he had fought so valiantly.

The man in the hall remembered Clem's face; and, apart from that, Mr. Royston was a man who saw all his callers, except when he was engaged at the whist-table, so Mr. Borthwicke got the information he wanted.

Mr. Royston was at the theatre—a most unusual place for him to be in—but Mr. Kelper had talked him into going to see a piece written by an old friend of Mr. Royston's, and it had taken him a good ten minutes to coax him away from the card-room. Yes, as luck would have it, he did know which theatre they had gone to; he had heard the order given to the cabman. It was The Portico.

Clem had no occupation for the evening. Why should he not go also to The Portico, and see this piece of Claxton's which was being so much talked about, and perhaps see Royston at the same time?

The pit was full, but by dint of perseverance he in time got down to the barrier at the back of the stalls, and looked about for Royston's slim, upright figure. He discovered him presently in a box with a big, fair young man, whom he recognized as the Mr. Kelper he had seen in the hall at The Fallow. Claxton was there too, in irreproachable evening dress, and looking an altogether different person from the Bohemian pantomime writer of "The Camel and Howdah."

Clem waited till the act was over, and contrived in some mysterious manner to work his way into the smoking-room

attached to the dress circle, and there, sure enough, he met his man.

It was rather a funny meeting.

When Royston saw him approaching, and divined his intention to speak, he looked him straight in the face, and then deliberately turned his back. But Mr. Borthwicke was nowise thin-skinned, and he put his hands in his pockets and nodded with graceful ease to the other two men.

"How do?" he said pleasantly. "Mr. Royston don't look pleased to see me, does he? and I've come down here to-night on purpose to see him, too, as well as to congratulate you, Mr. Claxton, on your long-looked-for-come-at-last piece of luck. Mr. Royston was very annoyed with me the last time I had the pleasure of seeing you, Mr. Kelper, and no doubt he thought he had cause. But he hadn't all the same, don't you see you know. You remember the time I refer to?"

"Perfectly," Kelper answered shortly.

"Well, at that time I knew no more than a babe unborn of any reason why the sight of Arthur Mirfield's old friend should upset his supposed widow in that unaccountable fashion; but I've grown wiser since then, and if he wouldn't take it as a liberty I should like to call him a name that Mr. Garth applied to the little lady in question, the last time I had the honor to be in her presence. I should like to call him 'a thundering brick!'"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Royston, facing round suddenly.

"Just what I say," answered the little pop-gun of a man. "The lady you befriended so handsomely deserved all your forbearance, and more. It ain't the sort of thing to talk about in a public place like this, but I thought you would like to know that she had been the victim of appearances all through the piece, bang through from the very beginning, you understand, and that there is not the faintest chance of her position or her son's position ever being attacked again."

"I am glad to hear it," Royston said quietly.

He could not keep his surprise altogether out of his face, but he could and did keep it out of his words, and just for

a moment it seemed as if there was nothing further to say, until Clem mentioned his intention of going behind the scenes to see Miss Cunningham.

Then Claxton had a word in the matter.

"She knows all you want to tell her," he said. "Mr. Garth wrote her a full account a week ago. I would not go round to-night if I were you. Her wretched old sinner of a husband is so ill that she hardly expects to find him alive when she gets home. I'll tell her of your kind intention if you like. I have arranged to take her home by and by."

Clem looked knowing, but had the grace to hold his tongue, and, after shaking hands all round, found his way back to his place in the pit, and sat the piece out to the end.

As Kelper and Royston took their way westward later on, the elder man rallied his companion on his absence of mind, and wanted to know if there was any bother on.

"Well," came the answer, "I wouldn't confess as much to any other man alive, but I've had a bad fall, Royston, and it's shaken me more than I fancied. Nothing lasting, you know, but I think I shall pull round all the quicker for a little change of ideas. I'll get away a bit. Do some bear-shooting in Russia, or something of the sort, and knock the nonsense out of myself. If anybody is curious about me, you can say the usual thing—'Gone to kill something.' I'll be back in time for the grouse, and I count on you to come and help me warm the old Yorkshire house again."

Royston said nothing beyond a formal acceptance of the invitation. He remembered the scene in the hall at The Fallow, and thought he knew something, but he was nothing if not consistent, and non-intervention was still his favorite principle.

CHAPTER XXXI.

“AS IT FELL UPON A DAY; IN THE MERRY, MERRY MONTH
OF MAY.”

THE world in general never knew quite how it came about that Molly was received in society as “Lady Mirfield,” but then, as a matter of fact, the world did not really trouble itself much about it.

It was at the house of Mrs. Abney Garth—the wife of one of the most notable scientific writers of the day—that the world in general first made Molly’s acquaintance, and since Mrs. Abney Garth always alluded to her sister-in-law as “Lady Mirfield,” and always introduced her as such, it came about as a natural thing that the world in general followed the example set it.

At the same time, people did wonder a little that Mrs. Abney Garth should have been willing to drop her title of viscountess, but it was perhaps hardly to be wondered at on the whole, seeing how she revelled in her husband’s distinction, that she should prefer to be known by his name alone, without any misguiding prefix whatever.

But the world had long ago ceased to wonder about these things now, since they were among the accepted facts of the past three seasons, although there was another little matter in connection with that same set of people which continued to arouse the idle curiosity of a great many. Folks continually wondered among themselves why “that sweet little Lady Mirfield” did not get married again.

“It’s not for want of chances, that I do know,” said Tom Toozle to the Honorable Jimmy Plunger in the smoke-room of the club, “nor for want of good chances neither. It ain’t only the needy young grubbers like you and me, Jimmy, my boy, who are anxious to make a grab at that plump, dainty, succulent little caterpillar. Chaps whose own banking accounts place them right away above any suspicion of hankering after the chance of playing host down at Netley Fallow for the next fifteen years or so, have made themselves conspicuous by doddering about after her

in the most sickening fashion. And not only one or two, neither. She had a plenty to pick from last season, and she's got as many again this, but she seems to turn up her good-looking little nose at the lot. I wonder what she's waiting for—a dook, perhaps, or a prince of the blood royal."

"Got a bit dainty, perhaps," observed the Honorable Jimmy. "Likely as not she'll have to put up with the crooked stick after all, if she don't mind her p's and q's."

"I think her behavior is simply disgusting," said Lady Sapolio to her four unmarried daughters, in the privacy of her own sanctum. "If she doesn't mean to marry again, why does she go into society at all? The way she allows the men to run about after her is positively indecent. If she don't want any of them she might at least give somebody else a chance."

"As for them running after her," returned the youngest and least soured of the Sapolio fledglings, "I really don't believe she can help that, mother. I've seen her look downright bored when some old imbecile has been paying her ridiculous compliments."

"Not help it? Don't betray your ignorance in that fashion!" exclaimed the mother. "Do you think I ever had men running about after me when I was a girl, as she has? I hope," she added immediately, warned perhaps by some flash of mutual understanding in the faces before her that it would be wiser not to wait for a definite answer to her inquiry—"I hope I knew better what was due to myself and my position. A woman can always help making herself conspicuous if she chooses. I have heard there is some curious story about Lady Mirfield's marriage, something exceedingly discreditable; nobody seems to know the exact truth of the affair, but it is quite certain there is something against her if one could only get at the real facts. And that makes her present conduct all the more incomprehensible. One would have thought she would have been glad to marry again, and leave the past behind her."

And even Charlotte joined privately in the outcry against Molly's fastidiousness, and felt herself personally aggrieved when she refused her fourth really good chance, without

offering any explanation of her conduct beyond the usual excuse of disinclination.

“What more can she want?” Mrs. Garth asked of her husband, with an injured air. “It is impossible that a woman of her age can expect to live the rest of her life alone, and this man is irreproachable in every way. I do wish you would give her a good talking to, Abney.”

And Abney, who always made a point of obliging his wife when there was no reason why he should not, did venture a little remonstrance when he next found himself alone with Molly.

But he did not get much satisfaction out of the interview.

Molly laughed her gay little laugh, and candidly confessed her shortcomings. It was very ungrateful to keep on saying “No,” when Lotte put herself to so much trouble to secure these good chances for her. Perhaps it would be as well to put men on their guard from the first. Did Abney think it would be a good idea to supplement all future introductions with a remark to the effect that she was not for disposal?

“If I was not positively certain to the contrary,” said Mrs. Garth, when her husband reported the interview to her, “I should think there was somebody else in the background; but that is quite out of the question. We know everybody she has met, both at Netley and in town, and I am certain there is nobody among them that she cares for in the least.”

Which remark only goes to show how well Molly had kept her secret. But her Nemesis was at hand.

She was driving alone down Piccadilly—she brought her own victoria to town with her for the season always, so that she might not put too great a strain upon Lotte’s horses, who had quite enough work on their hands with their owner’s numerous engagements, and that was how it happened that she was alone on this particular afternoon at the end of May—just at the busiest hour of the day. Lotte had so much work to get through just now that she had scarcely a minute to call her own, and she had asked Molly to go down to Mr. Hayes’ office in Bond Street, to see if there was a decent box left for The Portico that

night. A girl cousin of Abney's had put in a rather unexpected appearance from the country that morning for a week's stay, and this was the only night Lotte could spare for the play.

Molly was feeling a little fatigued this afternoon, and was congratulating herself, as she was carried smoothly along on her noiseless tires, on her coming emancipation. She never spent July in London; another week or ten days would find her back at Netley, among her own particular set of friends, with full liberty to exert herself just as much or as little as fitted in with the inclination of the moment.

Noting the thirsty look of the trees on the pavement, and the glare of the roadway under the white sunlight, and the tired looks of most of the people on the omnibuses, she almost wished she was already up there in her lovely old house, with the fresh, free air from the Yorkshire moors blowing about her.

A sudden dislike for all this eager, bustling, pushing, striving stream of life seized upon her, as it often did toward the end of her two-months' stay with the Garths. She wanted to be away from this wedged mass of humanity, the jostling cabs and carriages, these red-faced 'bus drivers and panting horses, these towering buildings, and this everlasting stream of men and women, all so horribly like one another that one grew heart-sick of the monotonous procession of funnel hats and frock coats, and straight skirts and wasp waists, and felt a positive sense of mental refreshment at the sight of a Neapolitan organ-grinder, unwashed though she might be, because of the grateful touch of variety she imparted to the scene.

She got blocked some little distance before she reached Bond Street, and sat and simmered in the sunshine, and watched the people filing past on the pavements, and rather envied some of them their capacity for enjoyment as exemplified by their smiling faces.

While she was still blocked there, close to the curb, a man passed by, so near that she could have touched his coat-sleeve. She saw him for the briefest moment imaginable as he passed on with his back to her, and was shut from her sight by the man on the box, but that momentary

view of an unusually wide pair of shoulders and an uncommonly long pair of arms set her heart beating and plunging about inside her until it threatened to fight its way out of her altogether.

Was it, could it be George?

All these three years she had heard nothing of him except through other people—an occasional “kind remembrance” or “best respects” at the tail end of a business letter to Abney was all the communication she had received from him since the night they had talked across the engraving in the drawing-room at Netley, the night he had told her he had found out all about “Philpott,” that he did not blame her a bit, but was sorry for her from the bottom of his heart.

He must have heard all about that miserable deception long before now, for though he had been right away up in the front of the expedition into Burmah all the time, he had kept up a regular correspondence with his mother the whole way through, and she was bound to have given a full account of the disclosures which had followed upon Lord Netley’s death.

But as he had not chosen to make any sign Molly had not found it possible to do so either; and so things had remained as they were all through this long separation. And now, here he was back in London again, without having given anybody notice of his return, and—how were they going to meet one another?

When her carriage moved on again she had forgotten all about her own fatigue, and the heat of the day, and her longing for the country air; she had eyes and thoughts for but one thing. Where was George? Had he gone on down Piccadilly, or had he turned up Bond Street?

She watched the pavement and the shop windows narrowly as she went quietly along in the slow-moving procession of vehicles, and just before she reached the end of Bond Street she saw the man with the long arms cross it, and go straight on.

“Go on to the Burlington Arcade,” she called up to the coachman, “and get through as quickly as you can.”

And then she sat back in the carriage again, and wondered if the men had noticed the throb in her voice, and

kept her eyes on the broad, low shoulders just ahead of her.

If it should not be George after all?

She turned her face right round to the pavement as they drew level, and then, in her eagerness to catch his glance, she leaned quite forward and well over the side toward him.

The movement attracted his attention, and their eyes met, and a great light flashed across his face, and his hat was off, and the carriage was drawn up at the curb, and her hand was in his, and "Little madame!" he said, with his very heart in his voice, and then they remained looking at one another, and saying nothing.

But for all that there must have been some touch of impressiveness in the meeting, for several passers-by were struck by the look on Molly's face, and some of them even drew up when they had gone a few steps on, and turned to watch the scene a little longer.

Well, Molly could not keep her lips hard nor prim, nor could she prevent her eyes from shining in the throb and glow of that moment, but, that apart, she behaved with the most remarkable presence of mind.

"I am going to get a box for 'The Matchmaker' for to-night," she said; "will you come with me and help me to choose it?"

And George stepped into the dainty little carriage, and the horses' heads were turned toward Bond Street again.

What those two people said to each other during that drive goodness alone knows. Perhaps—indeed, probably—they said very little in actual words; for Molly only wanted to know one thing, and that she chose to think that first glance of his had told her. Was it possible, she said to herself confidentially, that a man could look at a woman in just that fashion unless he loved her?

But whether they said much or little, the result was eminently satisfactory.

At six o'clock that evening Charlotte was in her husband's large, cool, shadowy study at the back of the house, drinking a cup of tea, while she told him the events of her afternoon round of visits. She had really come in as much for the sake of weaning him from his work as anything,

because she particularly wanted him to go with them to the theatre that night, and she knew he would need a little coaxing to reconcile him to the seven o'clock dinner—which meant the loss of a clear hour from his afternoon's work.

She had only just succeeded in making him sociable and pleasant when they were both surprised by the sudden appearance of Molly at the door—Abney's study was looked upon as sacred ground by everybody in the house but his wife.

“They told me you were here, Lotte,” said Molly, standing in the open doorway, outlined against the radiance of the sunlit hall behind her, and looking herself the personification of sunshine, from the topmost rosebud in her dainty bonnet to the hem of her gauzy gray gown, “and I was so impatient I could not wait while a message was sent to you. There is an old friend outside here; may he come in?”

Lotte jumped out of her deep chair, and set her tea-cup down with a little clatter, and came hastily forward, catching the infection of Molly's eagerness at a glance.

“Who is it?” she said. “Is it a trick you are playing on us, Molly?”

And Molly stepped aside and beckoned George to show himself; and even she, exacting as she was for him, could not find anything to complain of in the welcome they gave him.

“What an unfair thing to take us by surprise like this!” said Abney, when the first burst of greeting was over. “If you thought to get here in advance of your new reputation as a hero you have only arrived in time to find out your mistake. Three weeks ago the papers were full of your exploit at the passing of the Wahally. We were quiet lions for a few days by reason of our remote connection with you. Lady Mirfield got quite sick of saying ‘yes’ to the eternal question, ‘Was she any relation to the Wahally man?’”

“George knows better than to believe that,” said Molly, smiling across at him in a way which rather made Charlotte open her eyes. “I never was so proud of being a Mirfield as when I was able to claim relationship with the man everybody was talking about.”

"We wondered if you would get the Victoria Cross, George," Charlotte said inquiringly.

But he shook his head with a quiet smile.

"That sort of thing does not fall in my way," he said. "I've got a stiff knee, which I am likely to carry to my grave, to remember the affair by. If it had not been for the doctor's orders to come home and give the joint a chance, I should have waited out there till the fuss had all blown over."

"I'm glad you did not," said Charlotte. "You have just arrived in time to give a fillip to the end of the season. I shall reissue my cards for my last two At Homes, and let people understand they are to meet Captain George Mirfield."

But George would not hear of this. He could not face anything of that kind, he said; and besides, he was going to utilize his sick-leave by getting married. He hoped to be off on his honeymoon by that day week, so Charlotte would have to excuse him this time.

And as he spoke, Mrs. Garth caught him taking a wicked glance at Molly, and looking that way herself she found that Molly was actually blushing, upon which there was a great outcry of astonishment and indignation, and inquiry as to the "When and How" of this surprising state of affairs.

But she did not hear all the story there and then, for they had to rush away to dress, and George in particular had to hurry, for he had to get all the way down to St. James' and back, and make his toilet into the bargain, in a few minutes over the half-hour. For he did give in that much to Charlotte's desire to lionize him, he consented to make one of the party in her box that evening.

It was at the end of the first act—when Charlotte had borne off her husband and the girl cousin to pay a visit to some people in the opposite box, about whom she did not care a rap, and who were very surprised at the unexpected civility—when Molly and George had ten minutes of one another's precious society, that Molly pointed out a name on the programme, "Miss Cunningham."

"Do you know who she is?" she asked. "Do you remember telling me, that last awful night at The Fallow,

that you had found out all about Philpott? Well, this Miss Cunningham was the real Mrs. Philpott, the real Molly de Courcy who married Arthur Mirfield. She is Mrs. Somebody-else now. That poor Philpott has been dead quite a long time, and she has married a man who writes plays—oh, here is his name, this is one of his pieces—Mr. Claxton. They are quite people of consequence. Charlotte knows them, and she and I bow to one another when our carriages pass in the park. She is a dear little woman—as charming off the stage as she is on, and I believe her husband adores her. She is almost the only lady caller that Abney leaves his study for. I should like to ask them to The Fallow this autumn, at the same time with Abney and Charlotte.”

“She must be a thoroughly good sort to have kept quiet as she did,” said George. “Ask them by all means.”

Charlotte behaved with the most exemplary patience all through that evening, but when George had at last taken his departure for the night she followed Molly to her room with a very determined look in her eye, and demanded to be told the meaning of all this surprising business; and Molly had to make a clean breast of the whole thing, and nicely indignant Charlotte was when she heard.

“You have often been mad with me because I sent other men away,” said Molly, when she had related the whole story of the Leuville love-making, “but how could I give a thought to another man, while there was the faintest chance of George and me ever coming together? Did you ever hear of such unselfishness—to go quietly away like that, and leave me in possession of the position which he believed was his by right? It was every scrap as generous on his part as if I had really been the adventuress he thought me, and I don’t believe there is another man living who would have done it.”

At heart Charlotte was inclined to challenge this assertion, but, looking at Molly’s brimming eyes and tremulous lips, she thought better of it, and stooped and kissed her instead.

“You romantic, impulsive little person!” she said, “it is lucky that it is such a suitable arrangement, for you would have married him, no matter how undesirable the

match might have been. As it is—well, it might easily have been much worse. He has the income from his mother, and the twenty thousand from Lord Netley, and, of course, he will have all his mother has to leave. Then, again, it will be very convenient having one of the trustees in residence at The Fallow; it will ease Abney of the greater part of the responsibility, and set his mind at rest about doing his duty to the estate.”

“Well, it is fortunate you approve,” answered Molly, with a smile which Charlotte understood perfectly, although she made believe she did not see it. “There is only one drawback to the whole thing, and that is Mrs. George.”

“I think you may safely leave that to him,” said Charlotte; and the result proved her in the right.

The Honorable Mrs. George Mirfield was never once allowed to assume an air of authority in her daughter-in-law’s house, and the old feud no longer existed, except as a small cloud in the sky, left a long way behind.

George has not gone out to Burmah again. That stiffness of the knee-joint has turned out a stubborn business, and promises to fulfil his prophecy of standing by him, as a memento of the Wahally affair, to his dying day. It does not interfere much with him while he keeps on his feet, but it has robbed him of his old dashing seat in the saddle. It is a source of great regret to him, of course, and Molly’s sympathy is always full and ready when he alludes to it; but then, as she says, how much worse it might have been. But for the injury to his knee he might have remained out there in India until he had lost his last shred of liver, or until she had, in desperation, married one of her numerous dangles; while, as it is—well, as it is, Charlotte declares that Molly is proud of that slight limp of her husband’s, that she is never so inordinately vain as when somebody asks her how Captain Mirfield got his stiff knee, and she is able to answer, with a transparent little air of thinking nothing of it:

“Oh, don’t you know? It happened in the Wahally incident—the crossing of the torrent, you know. One of our advance parties were surprised in overwhelming numbers by the Dacoits, and my husband and two others held a plank bridge while the men were sawing it through be-

hind them. He put his knee out as he swam across afterward, and it was not properly attended to. When he grumbles about it, I call it his V.C., because it always draws attention to his valor; but he says it is a distinction he could have done without remarkably well.”

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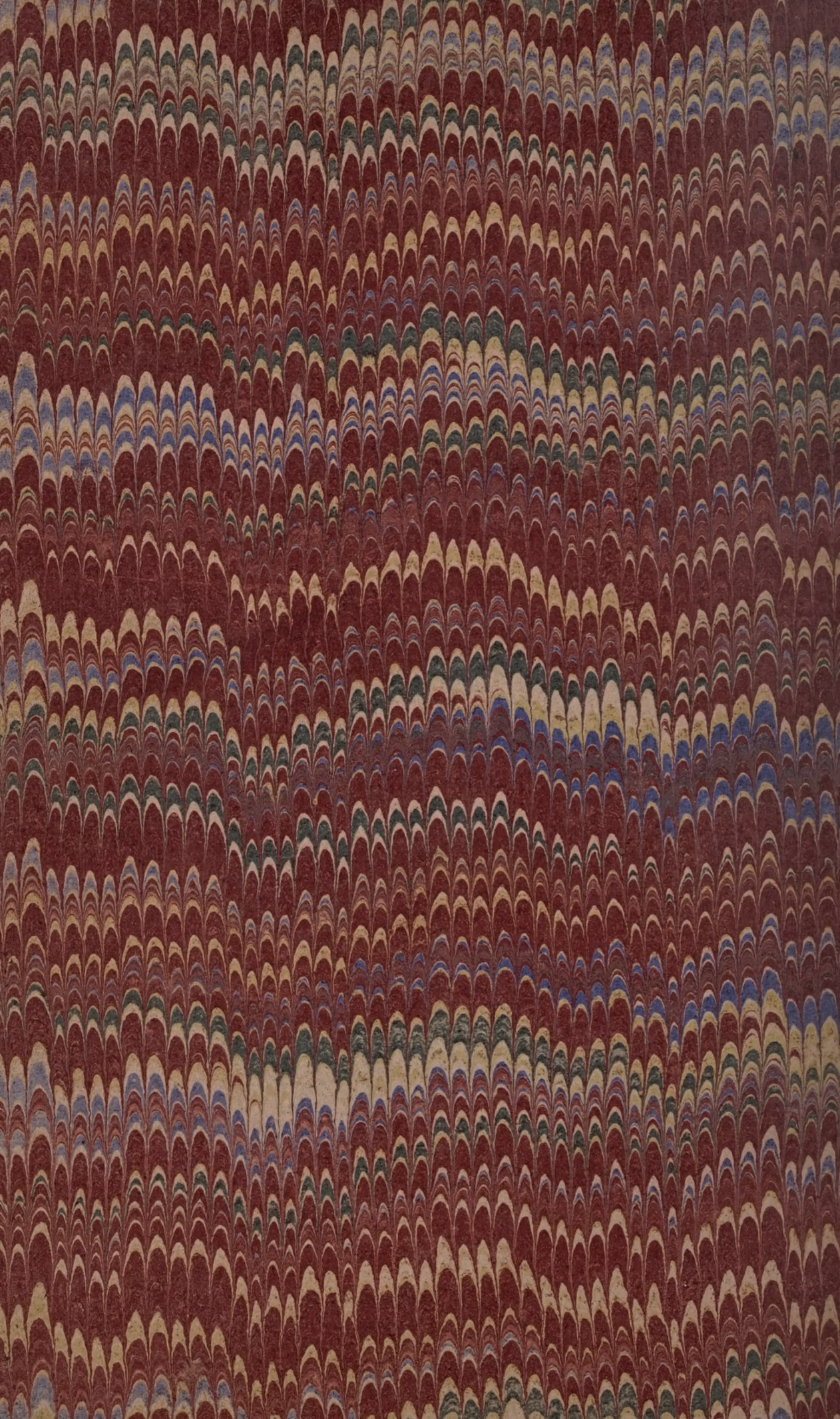
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